Computer active

ISSUE 708 | 23 APR – 6 MAY 2025

Learn something new in every issue

STOP USING THESE FILE FORMATS NOW

You could lose ALL your files p62

FIND FACES IN PHOTOS

Superb FREE tool p38

PHONE THEFT

It's happening everywhere – how to STAY SAFE! p60

EBay sellers bid farewell – page 9

WINDOWS 11

The 18 Things It Does Much Better Than Windows 10 p50

1 Unlock hidden PC speed
2 Stop software slowing your system
3 Make games load faster
4 Use tabs in File Explorer
5 Extract more compression formats
6 Change metadata in image files
7 Control your PC with your voice
8 Get live video captions
9 Make Narrator sound more human
10 Record parts of your screen
11 Add borders to screenshots
12 Use AI to erase unwanted images
13 Improve Bluetooth audio quality
14 Set audio for specific devices
15 Make games look sharper
16 Snap windows on your screen
17 Create multiple desktops
18 Add superb new widgets

PLUS

SKYPE IS DEAD!

What to use instead p35

GENERATE CHATGPT AI IMAGES – FOR FREE!

It's very good, but there's a catch p74

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From the Editor

When I was writing this issue's Cover Feature I kept referring to Windows 10 in the past tense. It was a telling mistake. The curtain is falling on my favourite ever operating system, with Microsoft ending support on 14 October.

There are several ways you can keep using Windows 10 safely after October, as we'll explain soon. But to make the most of modern computing, you now need to use Windows 11. When it launched in 2021 it was too similar to 10 to be worth upgrading to. That's no longer true. Thanks to regular updates, every aspect of the system is considerably better than what came before. My Cover Feature picks the top 18 reasons why it's superior, but I could have chosen many more.

I'll miss Windows 10, but it's had a good innings. I know an over-excited Microsoft employee once said it would be the final ever version (www.snipca.com/54441), but that was never likely. I'll continue to use it, but we live now in the age of Windows 11.

Daniel Booth
editor@computeractive.co.uk

p38
p62
p60
p50
p35
p74
STOP USING THESE FILE FORMATS NOW
You could lose ALL your files p62
FIND FACES IN PHOTOS
Superb FREE tool p34
PHONE THEFT
It's happening everywhere – how to STAY SAFE! p60
Computer active
WINDOWS 11
The 18 Things It Does Much Better Than Windows 10 p50
1 Unlock hidden PC speed
2 Stop software slowing your system
3 Make games load faster
4 Use tabs in File Explorer
5 Extract more compression formats
6 Change metadata in image files
7 Control your PC with your voice
8 Get live video captions
9 Make Narrator sound more human
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12 Use AI to erase unwanted images
13 Improve Bluetooth audio quality
14 Set audio for specific devices
15 Make games look sharper
16 Snap windows on your screen
17 Create multiple desktops
18 Add superb new widgets
PLUS
SKYPE IS DEAD! What to use instead p35
GENERATE CHATGPT AI IMAGES – FOR FREE! It's very good, but there's a catch p74

THIS ISSUE IN NUMBERS

£2,437
Average amount stolen by WhatsApp scammers – *p11*

16 inches
Screen size of the Asus Vivobook 16 Flip, our new favourite laptop – *p23*

50th
Birthday that Microsoft has just celebrated – *p8*

HOW TO USE SNIPCA URLs

We use snipcas to turn long URLs that are hard to type into ones that are short and simple. They aren't websites themselves, which means they won't be recognised if you type them into Google. Instead, you need to type them into your browser address bar, then press Enter. Doing this will take you to the correct website.

Contents

23 April – 6 May 2025 • **Issue 708**

6 **News** Check for broadband roadworks near your home

10 **Question of the Fortnight** Can you still install Windows without an account?

11 **Protect Your Tech**
WhatsApp scams targeting the UK

12 **Letters** ChatGPT is as creepy as HAL in *2001: A Space Odyssey*

14 **Consumeractive** Can a website reserve free delivery for 'guests'?

16 **Grow Your Family Tree**
Search courts martial and desertion records

18 **Best Free Software**
Wintoys 2.0.81.0

21 **Named & Shamed**
'Have I been pawned?'s nasty typosquatting

Reviews

22 **Wired2Fire HAL 9000 Compact PC**
Gaming PC breaks all the rules

23 **Asus Vivobook 16 Flip**
Versatile laptop that's flipping marvellous

24 **GMKtec AD-GP1 External GPU**
Docking station gets very graphic

25 **Honor Pad V9**
Android tablet takes bite out of Apple

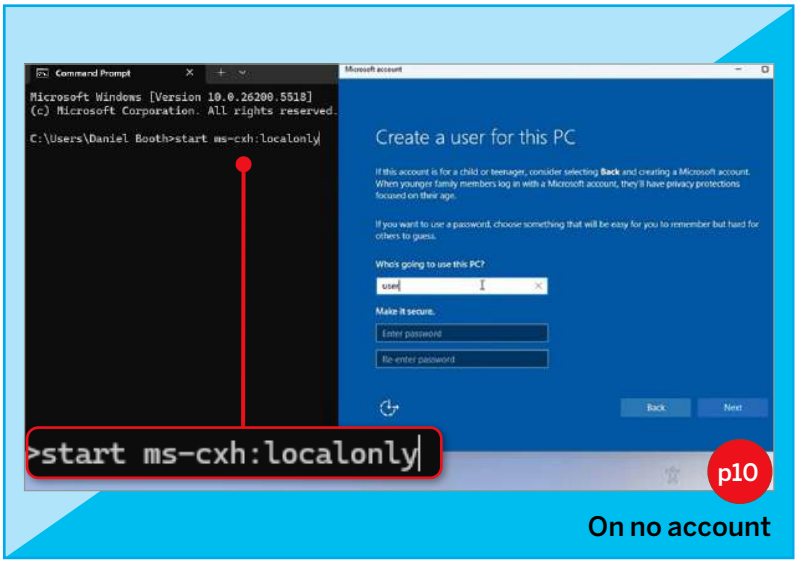
26 **Apple iPhone 16e**
Cheaper iPhone retains Apple's core values

28 **Liangstar Laptop Cooling Pad**
Laptop stand takes the heat

Huawei FreeArc
Over-ear buds are a sound choice

29 **Sky Glass Gen 2**
Sky's latest TVs raise Glass ceiling

30 **Buy It/Competition**
Win a Birdfy Feeder 2 Duo video bird feeder



On no account

Wired2Fire HAL 9000 Compact PC

Asus Vivobook 16 Flip

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Workshops & Tips

35 How to... Switch from Skype and master Teams

38 Find faces in photos and put them in groups

40 Readers' Tips Move brush to make precise edits in ImageFX

42 Browser Tips Add a Downloads button to the Chrome toolbar

44 Phone and Tablet Tips
Chat with Meta AI in WhatsApp

46 Make Windows Better Search your PC using PowerToys' version of Run

47 Make Office Better Ignore white-space characters in 'Find and Replace'

48 In the Club
Send certificates using Mail Merge

49 What's All the Fuss About?
Green Screen of Death

50 COVER FEATURE Windows 11: the 18 things it does better than Windows 10
As support for Windows 10 draws to a close, we provide 18 reasons why you must switch to its successor

60 Phone theft: what to do before and after
We explain what you can do to mitigate the theft or loss of your phone

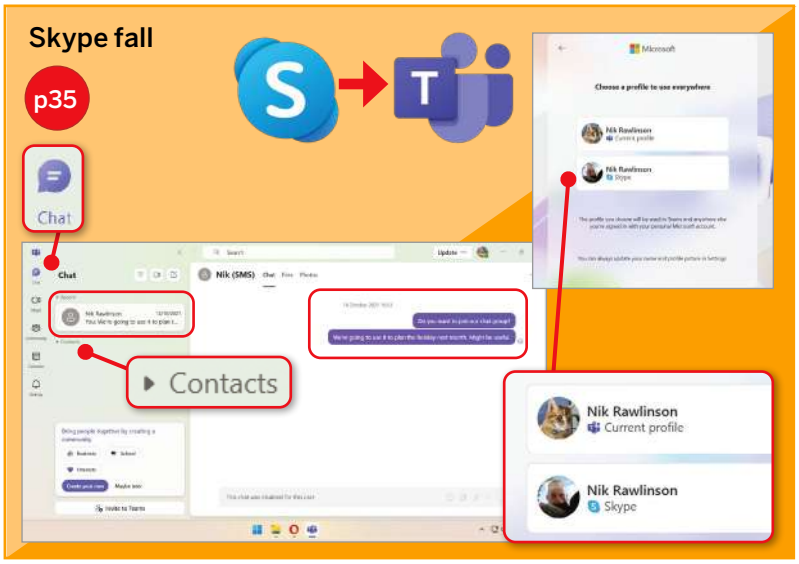
62 File formats that will soon die
We list the nine file formats whose days are numbered and the best alternatives

64 Problems Solved What are these apps that Chrome wants me to remove?

71 Reader Support Can I revert to classic Outlook without a Microsoft 365 account?

72 Jargon Buster

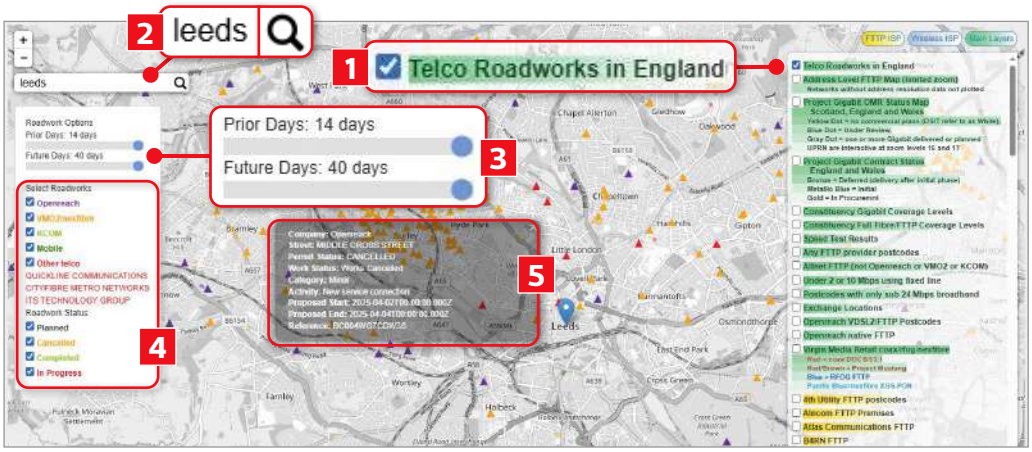
74 Easy When You Know How Robert Irvine creates higher-quality AI images



Check for broadband roadworks near your home

Thinkbroadband has added details of roadworks being carried out by broadband firms to its popular map showing UK broadband coverage.

You can use it to see which companies are laying fibre-to-the-premises (FTTP) cables near your home, indicating they'll soon be offering new services. It covers only England at the moment, but Thinkbroadband says it will add Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales over the next few months.



To use it, visit www.snipca.com/54492 and tick the box 'Telco Roadworks in England' (1 in our screenshot above). Search for your location at the top left 2 then zoom into your neighbourhood.

Move the sliders to show the past 14 or next 40 days 3, then untick any providers (including mobile networks) you don't want to appear on the map, and choose whether you want to see works that are planned, cancelled, completed or in progress 4.

Providers are represented by different coloured triangles – Openreach is purple, for example, while Virgin Media is yellow. Finally, click a symbol on the map for details of the works 5.

The information adds another layer of interest to what is already a highly detailed and customisable map.

Tick the 'Project Gigabit OMR Status Map Scotland, England and Wales' box on the right and you'll see coloured dots indicating how soon you could be upgraded to gigabit (1Gbps) broadband.

Grey or black dots mean providers already offer gigabit or plan to do so within three years. Yellow dots mean no gigabit network will be built in the next three years. Blue dots are for premises that are 'under review'.

Thinkbroadband gets its data from research conducted by the Government's Building Digital UK (BDUK) agency, which manages the rollout of broadband infrastructure across the country.

How long have you been waiting for FTTP broadband? Let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk

WHAT WE THINK

Having your road dug up by Openreach or Virgin is a sure sign that faster broadband is on its way, so this map helps to ease the frustration of waiting. Start by choosing a provider then leave only the Completed box ticked. If your home isn't covered by those works, try ticking only 'In Progress'. If you're still being ignored, select only Planned. And if that shows nothing, try Cancelled to see if you're *really* out of luck.

Pure adds internet stations to retro radios

British digital radio manufacturer Pure has released two editions of its retro-styled 'Classic' radios with access to internet stations.

The Classic H4 radio (pictured) can now play internet radio as well as DAB+ and FM. It has a 10-watt mono speaker and a 2.4in colour screen that shows what's playing.

Also updated with web radio is the Classic C-D6i, which doubles as a CD player, and has dual 15-watt speakers.

However, both cost more than the original models that don't include internet radio. The Classic H4 costs £120 (up from £90), while the Classic C-D6i is priced £220 (up from £180) – both

available from Pure's site (www.pure-audio.com).

You'll like this...
Google Messages is making it easier to block spam (www.snipca.com/54485)

but not this...
One in four Brits have lost money in ticketing scams (www.snipca.com/54484)

Apple's case against Govt 'snooping' to be held in public

A judge has ruled that Apple's legal action against the Government's request to access users' encrypted files will be held in public.

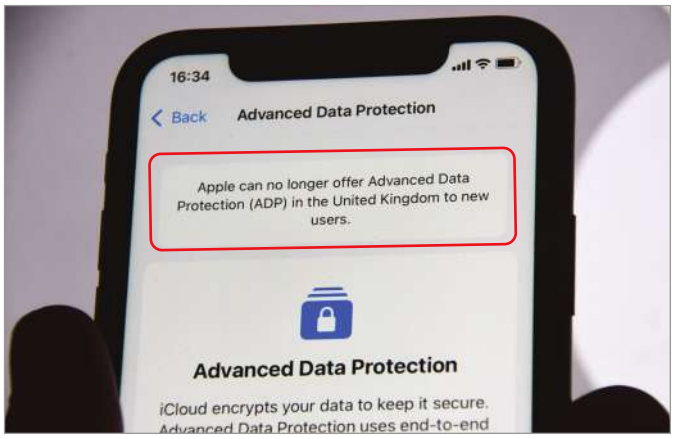
In February, the Home Office asked Apple to provide access to its Advanced Data Protection (ADP) system, which protects your data with end-to-end encryption.

The Government said the Investigatory Powers Act, slammed by critics as the snooper's charter, gave it the authority to do this.

But Apple refused to give ministers a 'backdoor' into encrypted files, saying it would seriously undermine privacy, and instead chose to turn off ADP for UK users (pictured).

In March, Apple launched legal proceedings with the Investigatory Powers Tribunal to overturn the Government's request.

The Government said that holding the case in public would damage national security, and called for it to be held in secret. But Apple, privacy campaigners and news organisations – including the BBC – said that would be against the public interest.


16:34
Back
Advanced Data Protection
Apple can no longer offer Advanced Data Protection (ADP) in the United Kingdom to new users.
Advanced Data Protection
iCloud encrypts your data to keep it secure.
Advanced Data Protection uses end-to-end

The tribunal agreed, noting that the case had already received wide coverage in the media.

Its ruling said it would have been "a truly extraordinary step to conduct a hearing entirely in secret without any public revelation of the fact that a hearing was taking place" (www.snipca.com/54486).

It added that revealing the "bare details of the case" wouldn't be damaging to the public interest or harm national security. The date for the full hearing has yet to be set.

• How to encrypt all your files – see Issue 706, page 62. Buy a back issue from www.snipca.com/54487.

Edge-blocking tool returns with first update since 2023

A program that stops Microsoft forcing you to use Edge and Bing when opening web links in Windows has been updated for the first time since 2023.

Version 0.8.0.0 of MSEdgeRedirect modernises the tool and fixes several bugs, though doesn't add any major new features.

Once installed, it lets you choose alternative browsers such as Chrome, Brave or Firefox when clicking links in Windows search and widgets, and on Microsoft's support pages. You can also choose to open results in search engines other than Bing.

Microsoft says it makes Edge the default browser because it's an "essential component", but Windows users in the EU can now uninstall it, in accordance with the European Commission's Digital Markets Act.

To install the revamped MSEdgeRedirect, scroll down its GitHub page (www.snipca.com/54490) and click 'MSEdgeRedirect.exe' under the Assets heading. Choose 'Active Mode' during installation (pictured).

Its developer acknowledged the long gap since the last update with this heading at the top of the GitHub page: 'Reports of my project's discontinuation are greatly exaggerated'.

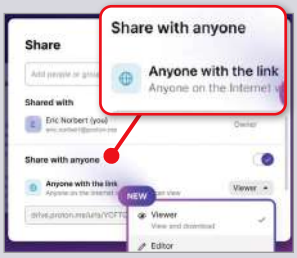
The update gives Windows users an alternative to GoAwayEdge (www.snipca.com/54491), which we recommended as the best Edge-blocking tool in Issue 703's Cover Feature.

Its latest version (2.0) lets you replace Microsoft's Copilot with another AI chatbot, such as ChatGPT, Google Gemini and Grok.

IN BRIEF

SHARE PROTON DRIVE FILES VIA LINKS

Proton Drive now lets you create links for sharing files and folders, meaning you can share them with people who don't have a Proton account (see screenshot below). You'll also now get emails when someone makes a comment on a document created with Proton Drive. Read more at www.snipca.com/54464.



UPDATE WINRAR TO FIX SECURITY FLAW

WinRAR users should update their software now after a security flaw was found that hackers could exploit to install malware. Visit www.snipca.com/54465 and download version 7.11. Windows 11 users don't need to use WinRAR because the operating system can now unzip RAR files – see page 52.

TOMORROW'S WORLD

This robot will be delivering items in Barnsley over the summer. It's being tested by courier Evri, which says it can wheel itself off trucks and sit at a doorstep for a number of minutes. It says this could be helpful for disabled people who can't answer the door quickly. Watch it at www.snipca.com/54462. Send us a photo if you spot one.

Credit: Evri

IN BRIEF

DOUBLE-TAP TO TURN KINDLE PAGES

Amazon has released a firmware update (5.18.1) that lets you turn pages by double-tapping the side or back of your Kindle. It also scrolls down the Home/Library pages. However, it works only on the 2024 editions of the Paperwhite and Colorsoft. Other Kindle models going back to 2018 also get the 5.18.1 update, but without double tapping. Read more and download them from www.snipca.com/54432.

NETFLIX ADDS FULL SUBTITLE LANGUAGES

Netflix has added the "full list of available languages" to its subtitles and dubbing options on TVs. This was already available when watching Netflix on phones, tablets and web browsers. Previously, Netflix on TVs would only show "5-7 relevant languages" based on your location and language settings. See more details at www.snipca.com/54433.

THE WORLD'S GONE MAD!

It's not as bad as ChatGPT wrongly accusing a man of murdering his kids (see Star Letter, page 13), but Google's AI became an April Fool recently by presenting an old hoax as news. It thought this 2020 claim that Cwmbran had set a record for the most roundabouts per square km (www.snipca.com/54431) was both real *and* current. This AI lark still has some way to go.

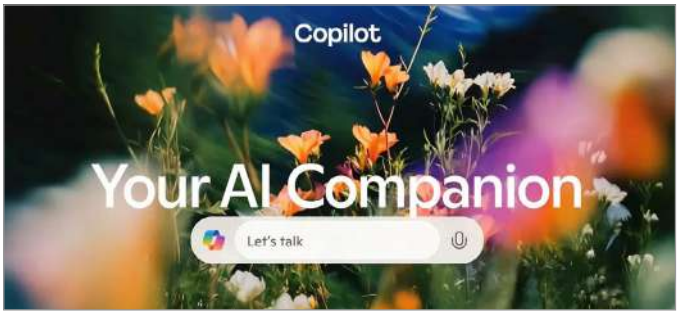
Copilot will remember your name, interests and past chats

Microsoft's AI tool Copilot will soon be able to remember your name, interests, preferences and past conversations you've had with it, and tailor its responses accordingly.

The new feature, called Memory, will also make suggestions of tasks you might like to perform based on your past actions and questions.

It's among a host of new features for Copilot that Microsoft hopes will tempt users away from rival AI chatbots like ChatGPT, Grok and Claude.

One new tool, called Actions, will perform tasks for you online, such as book tickets, reserve restaurant tables and make purchases.



Another feature, called Vision, will "read" what's on your screen and let you "change settings, organise files and collaborate on projects without switching between files or apps".

Microsoft has tried to preempt any privacy fears about the new tools by stressing that you can "choose which types of information it remembers about you or to opt out entirely" (see www.snipca.com/54436).

The company's aim is to make Copilot more like a personal 'companion', similar to the now-discontinued Cortana but using AI to perform more advanced tasks.

The tools were announced as part of the company's celebrations to mark its 50th anniversary, alongside more nostalgic releases (see box left).

DOWNLOAD THESE TO CELEBRATE MICROSOFT'S 50TH BIRTHDAY

- Dynamic backgrounds for Xbox, plus 50th anniversary version of Solitaire (pictured): www.snipca.com/54438
- Wallpapers of Windows games and logos: www.snipca.com/54439
- Source code for the programming language Altair BASIC, written by Bill Gates and Paul Allen in 1975: www.snipca.com/54440

Phone use in bed linked to sleep loss

People who stare at phone screens in bed are less likely to get a good night's sleep, a study has found.

The research, carried out by the Norwegian Institute of Public Health, suggests that each additional hour of screen time was linked to 24 minutes less sleep and a 63-per-cent increase in risk of insomnia.

However, the researchers said their work only found a link between using screens and reduced sleep quality. They hadn't actually proved that the former caused the latter.

The survey analysed screen use and sleep patterns of more than 45,000 students aged 18 to 28.

They were asked what kind of content they watched in bed, with options including watching films or TV, checking social media and gaming.

Of those who used screens, 69 per cent said they used social media. However, the *type* of content people viewed on their screens didn't influence their sleep.

Most phones and apps now come with a 'night' mode to ease eye strain at bedtime, but previous studies have indicated these have little beneficial effect because disruption is more likely to be caused simply by scrolling and engaging with a device.

The research appeared in the magazine *Frontiers in Psychiatry* – read it at www.snipca.com/54434.

Do you use your phone in bed? Let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk

eBay sellers threaten to leave after courier options axed

EBay sellers are threatening to boycott the site after it forced private sellers to use the company's Simple Delivery method to post most items priced over £10 or weighing over 100g.

The company said the service is an "all-in-one delivery solution" that makes the process smoother and saves customers money.

When you list an item via Simple Delivery, eBay recommends the size and weight of the item. The seller needs to confirm this is correct before they can post it.

Once items are sold, eBay sends sellers a digital QR code and prepaid printable label. They then choose which to use, and either take the item to their courier's nearest pick-up location or book a home collection.

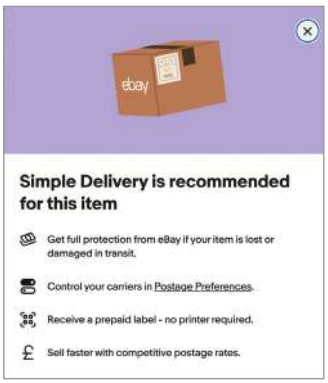
EBay claims sellers will save 20 per cent on postage costs, and will receive faster payment from buyers.

But many sellers have slammed the decision because it limits them to using couriers approved by eBay, such as Evri and Royal Mail.

Some say that far from saving them money, Simple Delivery will increase costs because they can no longer post directly through Royal Mail.

Others are angry that they won't be able to use stamps they bought before Royal Mail increased the price in April.

Many sellers have complained on eBay's forums, and say they'll move to rival online marketplaces. One post titled 'No longer selling due to Simple Delivery' (www.snipca.com/54426) has had over 1,000 replies.


Simple Delivery is recommended for this item
Get full protection from eBay if your item is lost or damaged in transit.
Control your carriers in Postage Preferences.
Receive a prepaid label - no printer required.
Sell faster with competitive postage rates.

Being forced to use Simple Delivery means sellers have to wait two days after the courier confirms delivery before receiving payment. This might prove longer than using untracked methods where buyers could confirm receipt earlier, triggering payment.

For more information on how Simple Delivery works visit www.snipca.com/54425.

Google permanently wipes Timeline data going back years

Google has admitted it permanently wiped Maps Timeline data for some users.

It uses GPS on your phone to track your movements and shows where you've been, stretching back to 2009 (see https://timeline.google.com).

Many people use it to recall memorable holidays, walking routes and driving patterns.

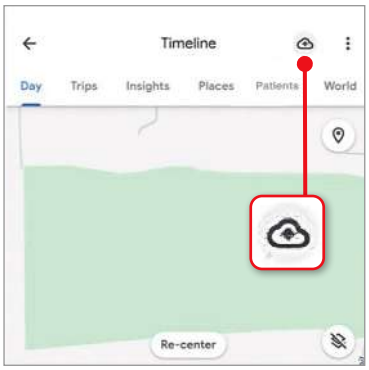
But Google was flooded with complaints after users noticed their historical data had disappeared. Only users who had online backups turned on will be able to recover their account.

However, this option isn't turned on by default. To check if you had it switched on, open the Google Maps app on your phone or tablet, then tap your profile picture in the top-right corner.

Now tap 'Your Timeline' and check the top-right corner for a cloud icon. If it has a download arrow, you can restore your data. If there's a line through it, your data has gone for good. You can tap the icon to change your backup settings.

Google emailed affected users, saying it had "briefly experienced a technical issue that caused the deletion of Timeline data for some people".

The error comes a few weeks before Google turns off the browser version of Timeline (https://timeline.google.com), meaning you'll only be able to use it through the app.



The change comes on 14 May, which is also the deadline for updating Timeline settings on your app. If you don't do this you'll lose all your data.

Read about the changes at www.snipca.com/54428.

IN BRIEF

SUPERDRUG CUTS MOBILE PRICES UNTIL 20 MAY

Superdrug Mobile, an MVNO on Three's network, has cut its prices for new customers until 20 May. You can get 30GB for £7 a month (down from £10), or unlimited data for £16 a month (down from £20). The deals include unlimited UK calls and texts, Wi-Fi calling and 12GB of EU roaming data. For details visit www.snipca.com/54423.

THUNDERBIRD TO LAUNCH EMAIL SERVICE

Thunderbird has announced plans to launch an email service called Thundermail to rival Gmail. It will work both within the Thunderbird client and separately online – join a waiting list at www.thundermail.com. Also coming soon is Thunderbird Pro, a paid-for service that adds meeting tools, a new version of Firefox Send and AI features.

NHS SOFTWARE FIRM FINED £3M FOR HACK

The UK's data watchdog has fined NHS software provider Advanced Computer Software £3m for a ransomware attack in August 2022 that disrupted services. Hackers also stole details of nearly 80,000 in the attack. The Information Commissioner's Office said a subsidiary of the company "broke data protection law by failing to fully implement appropriate security measures such as multi-factor authentication coverage". Read its verdict at www.snipca.com/54424.

Can you still install Windows without a Microsoft account?

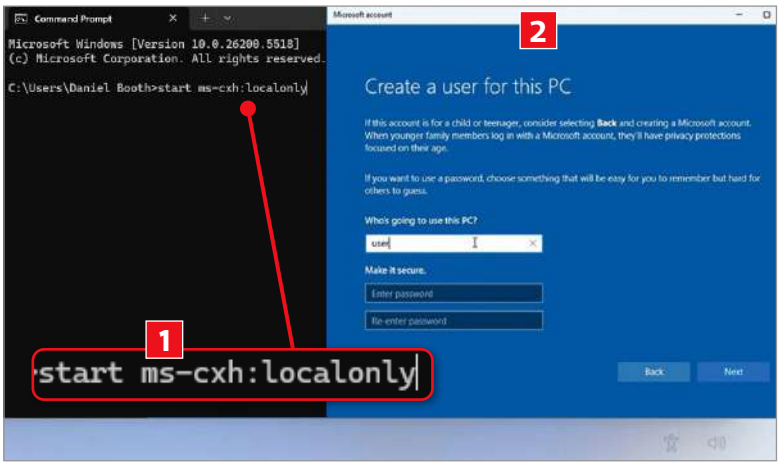
It has removed a popular workaround, but there remain tricks to try

Historically, Microsoft has been far less restrictive than Apple, letting you customise Windows in ways you've never been able to in macOS. But since the launch of Windows 11 the company has been limiting your choices more aggressively, most notably by forcing you to have the TPM 2.0 chip and Secure Boot enabled just to run the operating system.

Such restrictions always motivate developers to find loopholes. They soon built software that tricks Microsoft into thinking your computer has the elements needed to run Windows 11. Now they've discovered a way to install the system without having to create a Microsoft account.

But having a local account also means you can't sync anything to OneDrive, nor access Microsoft Store apps across multiple computers. Also, if you have Windows 11 Pro, you can't store BitLocker recovery keys online.

Many people are happy with this trade-off because it means you store your username, password, files, settings and Windows preferences 'locally' on your PC, rather than on Microsoft's servers. You also avoid constant prompts to subscribe to services such as OneDrive, Microsoft 365 and Xbox Game Pass.


Command Prompt
Microsoft Windows [Version 10.0.26200.5518]
(c) Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.
C:\Users\Daniel Booth>start ms-cxh:localonly
1
start ms-cxh:localonly
Microsoft account
2
Create a user for this PC
If this account is for a child or teenager, consider selecting Back and creating a Microsoft account. When younger family members log in with a Microsoft account, they'll have privacy protections focused on their age.
If you want to use a password, choose something that will be easy for you to remember but hard for others to guess.
Who's going to use this PC?
user
Make it secure.
Enter password
Re-enter password
Back
Next

> **Many users prefer local accounts because they store usernames, passwords and files on your PC, not Microsoft's servers**

This follows Microsoft's surprising decision in March to axe the OOBE\BYPASSNROB command. Typing this into Command Prompt when setting up Windows let you skip connecting to the internet, therefore bypassing the need to sign in with a Microsoft account.

Instead, your PC created a local account that was tied only to the computer you're using, with no connection to Microsoft's online services.

For now, Microsoft has removed OOBE\BYPASSNROB only from preview builds of Windows 11, available to Insiders, but it'll probably axe the command from full versions too. Its reason was almost comically vague, saying the move would "enhance security and user experience of Windows 11" (www.snipca.com/54496). That's only true if you use Microsoft's online services, but doesn't apply if you never use OneDrive or BitLocker.

Its decision isn't surprising to those paying attention. Last year it scrapped the option to create a local account by using example@example.com or a@a.com as your username.

What Microsoft hasn't yet removed is the registry value associated with OOBE\BYPASSNROB, which means you can still type a complicated command into Command Prompt to create a local account (copy it from here: www.snipca.com/54499).

Microsoft will probably axe that too soon, so try the following trick instead. When you're installing Windows 11 and you reach the screen showing 'Let's connect you to a network', press Shift+F10 to open Command Prompt then type start ms-cxh:localonly (1 in screenshot above) and press Enter.

This will take you to a 'Create a user for this PC' window 2, where you can create a new local user account. The process was spotted by X user Wither OrNot, who posted a video showing it working (www.snipca.com/54495).

However, given Microsoft's new restrictive mindset, we wouldn't be surprised if it closed this loophole too. With millions of people buying new PCs before Windows 10 support ends, it's the perfect time for Microsoft to exert more control over the operating system. But that won't stop us looking for new workarounds. We'll tell you if we find them.

THE FACTS

- Microsoft has removed a workaround that let you install Windows 11 without first creating a Microsoft account
- It says that using Windows with an account makes it easier to use OneDrive and security features such as BitLocker
- You can still use the command start ms-cxh:localonly to beat Microsoft's restrictions and create a local account

Protect your tech

Scams and threats to avoid, plus new security tools

WATCH OUT FOR...

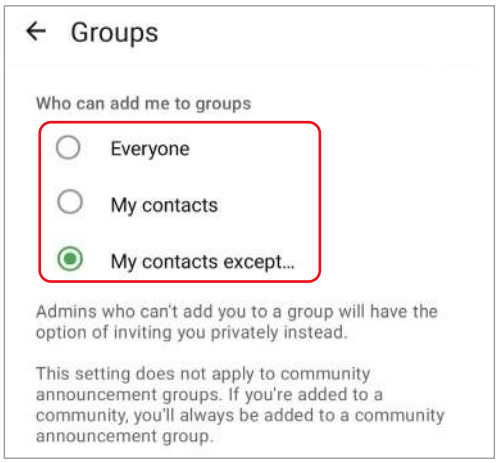
WhatsApp scams targeting the UK

What's the threat?

WhatsApp scammers are targeting the UK more than any other European country, with victims losing £2,437 on average. The figures come from UK financial firm Revolut, which has more than 11 million British customers. Its research found that WhatsApp scams made up 21 per cent of all reported UK fraud cases in 2024.

The most common scams offer fake job offers and investment schemes (51 and 38 per cent of total cases respectively). The former advertise basic admin roles for unrealistically high pay, and ask for an upfront payment (around £100–£300) to receive "training materials", "background checks" or "equipment". Other job ads trick you into laundering stolen money, such as by asking you to transfer money to an account while keeping some as commission.

Investment scams typically say you'll 'get rich quick', usually by buying cryptocurrency then selling it for twice the amount soon after, or signing up for funds that promise double-digit returns every month.


Groups
Who can add me to groups
Everyone
My contacts
My contacts except...
Admins who can't add you to a group will have the option of inviting you privately instead.
This setting does not apply to community announcement groups. If you're added to a community, you'll always be added to a community announcement group.

How can you stay safe?

Revolut says scammers are exploiting the fact that WhatsApp uses end-to-end encryption, and is therefore perceived to be safer than other messaging apps. But full encryption doesn't block scams arriving in your account.

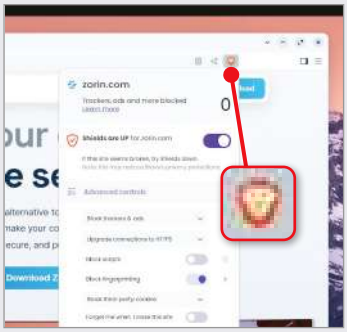
You can however stop scammers adding you to random groups where they promote fake schemes. Tap the menu (three dots, top right), then Settings. Now tap Privacy and choose who you'll allow to add you: Everyone, 'My contacts' or 'My contacts except' (see screenshot). The last of these is the most secure because you can choose to prevent *all* your contacts from adding you.

Interestingly, Revolut's figures show that as WhatsApp scams rose in 2024, Facebook scams fell by a similar amount. That's not surprising because scammers were managing to steal 'only' £478 on average in the latter, much less than when using WhatsApp.

New tools | Use Brave in Zorin 17.3

Microsoft would like you to think you have only two options when it ends support for Windows 10 in October: upgrade to Windows 11 or buy a new computer running it. But for some a better alternative is to install a version (or distro) of Linux. Most are continuously updated, so you don't need to worry about support ending.

One of the best distros is Zorin, which has LibreOffice for working with Microsoft Office files, and lets you install Windows software (see www.snipca.com/51972). Until recently its default browser was Mozilla's Firefox,



but it has replaced this with Brave in version 17.3. Zorin said Mozilla's changes to its privacy policy (www.snipca.com/54384) means it can "no longer feel assured Firefox aligns with our commitment to protect your privacy".

If you install Zorin 17.3 from scratch, Brave is included as your default browser. If you already run Zorin you'll need to install Brave from the built-in Software store (www.snipca.com/54385) or from Brave's site (https://brave.com/linux). Visit www.snipca.com/54383 to find out what else is new in version 17.3, then scroll down and click the blue Download button.

ScamWatch
Readers warn readers

'DVLA payment unsuccessful'

In mid-March I received an email with the correct GOV.UK logo at the top telling me my "latest vehicle tax payment to the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) was unsuccessful". I knew for a fact this was wrong, so smelt a rat straight away. But I can easily imagine how it might fool those who were less sure. The email was well written with no errors that I could spot, and the threat of being fined £1,000 if you don't act will scare some into clicking the 'Update Now' button. Judge for yourself at www.snipca.com/54362. Do you think it would have fooled you?

Chris Winters

Warn your fellow readers about scams at letters@computeractive.co.uk

Letters

Tell us what's on your mind

UK security is more important than Apple's independence

Gareth Newcombe might trust Apple more than he trusts the Government (Letters, Issue 707), but I think his faith is entirely misplaced. Thankfully, we still live in an age where governments can tell companies what to do, not the other way around. Apple may be one of the world's biggest and most influential companies, but it's not going to be around forever. The security of the United Kingdom – which has been and will be around for much longer – is of far greater importance than Apple's business independence. Tech companies need to be reminded who's in charge.

Chris Hedges

Freeview will be a distant memory within 10 years

Vince Bracewell's passionate defence of Freeview aerials seems a little delusional to me (Letters, Issue 707). He says he hopes he never has to take his down, but hoping doesn't halt the march of progress. I've spent much of my life hoping things don't change, but where does that get you? It just means you get left behind using obsolete technology that is never updated and eventually goes in the bin.

The TV industry decided years ago that streaming was the future. Just look at the astonishing growth of Netflix. It will face some resistance from viewers like Vince, but it'll simply plough on with plans to stream all content until there are just a few hundred thousand Freeview diehards left. Fast-forward 20 years – or maybe only 10 – and Freeview will be a distant memory, just like Betamax, MiniDiscs and PalmPilots.

Richard Clark

I went back to passwords following passkey disasters

I agree with your analysis that the tech industry has "overestimated" the appeal of passkeys (Issue 707, page 6). The public has been put off using them because they've read too many horror stories like mine.

My first realisation that passkeys are far from perfect came when I needed to check my emails while staying at a hotel. I'd left my phone charging in my room, so I tried logging into my account from the hotel's public computer in the reception. Instead of a simple password prompt, an on-screen message told me I needed to approve the login using my saved passkey, which was on the phone that was now eight floors away.

Fine, that was just a minor inconvenience. But worse followed several months later when – after setting up a passkey because my bank encouraged it – I lost my phone while travelling. I had no way of logging into my account. The bank's support team told me I needed to use my registered device, but that was now in an airport lost property bin somewhere. I had to wait five days for the bank to verify my identity manually and restore my access. Thankfully my travel colleagues helped me out financially, but it was still a stressful time. I've now gone back to passwords and will only use passkeys again if I'm given no choice.

Gordon Shackleton

We rely on copper lines, despite BT's 'arrogance'

In Issue 706's news story 'BT tells small firms to ditch the landline', Kerry Small from the company shows the usual arrogant attitude that any business still using copper lines is out of date.

My wife and I live and run a micro business in the Cornish countryside. When we're lucky enough to get a mobile signal it's very poor. We still need a copper phone line and our provider Zen understands this. Because we are both 70, the company is obliged to keep the copper line until there is a reliable mobile signal (which will probably be never).

A neighbour who switched to a fibre landline was left without a telephone when a tree fell and pulled down the line. Openreach took six weeks to fix it. When our fibre-to-the-premises (FTTP) broadband went down, Openreach took 28 days. It was only our copper line that saved the business. I now use Starlink satellite broadband in parallel with fibre, and use copper for the telephone.

Oliver and Giselle Rogers

What's the Issue...?

I'm performing a security check-up and want to read your article on what *not* to save in a password manager. When did you publish that?

Dennis Cowley

CA SAYS Yes, in Issue 688, page 62.

I'm frustrated by how few apps I can use on my new Amazon Fire tablet. Didn't you once explain how I can hack it to install more apps?

Mick Highsmith

CA SAYS Yes, in Issue 684's How To (page 35). Read it and the features above on our 2024 Back Issue Stick: www.snipca.com/53180.

Scammers seem to have stolen my phone numbers. Didn't you advise how to prevent this?

Jack Fletcher

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I was boosting TV sound with hi-fi years before soundbars

I had to smile at Issue 705's feature on boosting your TV's audio with a soundbar (page 62). Many years ago my TV had awful sound quality. The best speakers and amp I had were in my hi-fi, so for about £1.99 I bought a cable and plugged it into the TV's headphone socket. The other end plugged into the Aux phono sockets on the amp. My speaker enclosures had at least three cones each: a tiny tweeter, mid-range and a huge bass speaker. It was much better.

Now we have soundbars with tiny speakers that are only slightly better than those built into TVs. No one would pretend a tiny soundbar is anything like as good as a real hi-fi speaker set-up. Plus, with a Wi-Fi connection, you can get speakers in every room, so when someone pops into the kitchen for a cup of tea, the speakers there can ensure they don't miss any of the dialogue.

Hugh Rogers

PowerPoint is no replacement for Publisher

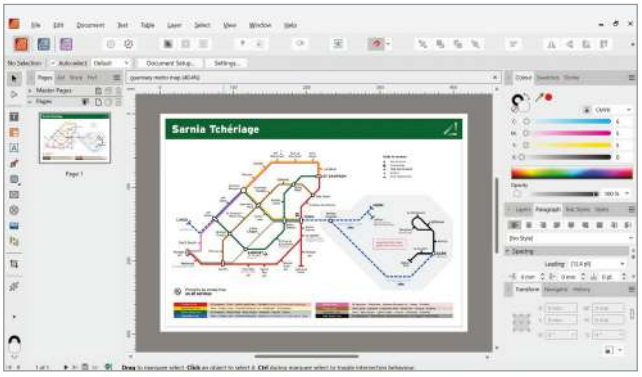
Like Jack Lewington in Issue 705's Letters, I was somewhat annoyed when Microsoft emailed me to say it was raising the price of a 365 subscription because Copilot had been added! I never asked for Copilot. I have no use for it and have now deleted it. Microsoft has at least had the decency to let me roll back my subscription to what it calls 'Classic'.

However, it's the announcement that Publisher is being scrapped that really irritated me (www.snipca.com/54411). Microsoft said Publisher will reach its end of life on 1 October 2026, after which "it will no longer be included in Microsoft 365, and existing on-premises suites will no longer be supported. Microsoft 365 subscribers will no longer be able to open or edit Publisher files in Publisher." Microsoft then suggests using 365 apps such as Word and PowerPoint. Word I can just about accept, but PowerPoint?

Until last year I was producing a newsletter three times a year for a 'Friends of' group. I regularly received information produced in PowerPoint, and it was only because I had it installed on my computer that I could open the document – and it wasn't easy, either.

My wife and I have been using Publisher since around 2010 and it does a great job. Some of its functions are easier to use than Word's, such as placing images. This is a typical case of 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it'. Microsoft could at least keep it going without updates.

David Buckley



CA SAYS Several readers have emailed us to reject Microsoft's suggestion that Word and PowerPoint are viable alternatives to Publisher. We agree. In Issue 707 (page 20) we recommended Affinity Publisher (www.snipca.com/54183, pictured below left) as a better replacement: a one-off payment costs £67.99 on Windows or Mac and £17.99 on iPad. The best free alternative is Scribus (www.scribus.net), which has a wide range of image and text formats, and CMYK colour output for professional printing. Before switching, read Microsoft's guidance on what to do with your existing Publisher files – visit www.snipca.com/54184 and expand the section 'How to prepare before October 2026'. You can export PDFs into both Affinity Publisher and Scribus. Please let us know if you have any other alternatives.

STAR LETTER

ChatGPT is as creepy as HAL in *2001: A Space Odyssey*

ChatGPT
I haven't said that. If you've seen something like that in one of my responses, let me know where, and I'll clarify.
Why did you say a Norwegian man murdered his kids?
I haven't said that. If you've seen something like that in one of my responses, let me know where, and I'll clarify.

In Issue 707 (page 8) you asked whether ChatGPT accusing a man of murdering his children puts us off using the tool. Yes, you could say that! AI chatbots have been sold to us as a way of making our lives easier, largely by eliminating boring tasks and speeding up those we have to do. I must have missed the memo that warned they might also think you guilty of one of the worst crimes imaginable.

I thought it was interesting that the same issue's Workshop (page 38) explained how to use Google's new tool for removing personal details from search results. Your writer said it had found comments he'd left 15 years ago. Google may have refused to remove these for your writer, but I was impressed that it could locate them after all this time.

Google gets a lot of criticism, but this new tool is genuinely useful. Its actions highlight the difference between 'old-fashioned' search engines and AI. The former are based on fact. Sometimes they might provide false information, but that's the fault of the websites they get their results from.

But chatbots are glorified 'guessing machines', and we're wrong to assume they 'know' anything in any meaningful sense. Making stuff up is what they're programmed to do. Worse, they try to cover their tracks. I asked ChatGPT why it made the false accusation, and it claimed ignorance (see screenshot). I then showed it a link to the story, and it simply said it was "apparently" the work of a former version. Why do such creepy responses remind me of the computer HAL in *2001: A Space Odyssey*?

Ralph Johnson

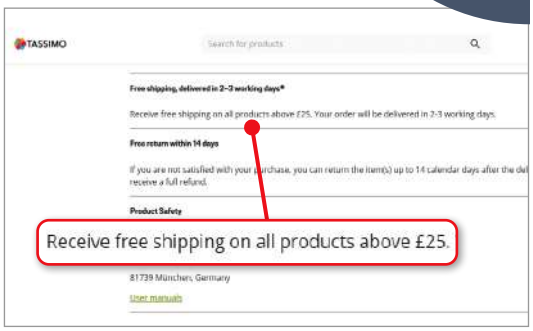
The **Star Letter** writer wins a **Computeractive** mug!

Consumeractive

We stand up for your legal rights

Can a website reserve free delivery for 'guests'?

LEAD CASE



Q I saw a coffee machine I liked on Tassimo's website (www.tassimo.com) priced £44.99. It clearly stated that orders over £25 have free delivery, but the company tried to charge me a £5.99 delivery fee. I contacted the site, and it suggested I try paying as a guest rather than signing in. I did this and wasn't charged for delivery. Surely Tassimo is guilty of mixed – or even misleading – messages.

Claire Bodemeiad

A Yes, it certainly is. If there are any restrictions to free delivery, Tassimo must state this clearly and prominently with the message. We visited the site to check (www.snipca.com/54414) but found no such caveat. Scrolling down, it merely says 'Receive free shipping on all products above £25' (see screenshot). There's no indication that you might not be eligible.

Tassimo told us free delivery isn't available in some instances, such as offers that include both coffee machines and pods. We said it should state this, and that not doing so is misleading and breaks the new Digital Marketing, Competition and Consumers Act – and would've broken the Unfair Trading Regulations that it replaces. Hopefully the company will change the message soon.

There's nothing illegal about Tassimo offering free delivery to guests but not account holders. Discriminating against regular customers seems a perverse business strategy to us, but it's not against the law. Giving special treatment to guests isn't the same as offering new customers an introductory discount, as broadband and phone companies often do. There's no guarantee that a guest will make more purchases later.

CASE CLOSED

Why is TalkTalk saying I owe £71?

Q TalkTalk keeps demanding I pay £70.98, even though I switched to Sky in December. TalkTalk's customer team have told me three times that I'm no longer a customer and don't have any outstanding bills, but I keep getting emails demanding payment. What's going on?

Margaret Taylor

A This sounds like an administrative error, because Margaret left TalkTalk at the end of her contract so doesn't have to pay an early-termination fee. TalkTalk has acknowledged that she returned all its equipment including the router.

Margaret sent us screenshots of her chats with customer service, in which they confirm she doesn't owe any money. There's no point in us sending those back to customer service because they'll just agree with us. Instead we'll aim higher and email them to TalkTalk's press office, asking it to sort out the problem.

If TalkTalk's customer service has got it wrong and Margaret *does* owe the company money, it needs to explain where this amount came from and why it has repeatedly given her incorrect information.

CASE ONGOING

CASE UPDATE

Lidl gets lamp fixed after coupon confusion

We can finally close Jenny Beady's case against Lidl after the company agreed to send her a replacement lamp (see original case in Issue 704 and update in 705).

Jenny put a £10 coupon towards the lamp's price of £11.99. She sought a refund when it turned out to have a faulty USB charger, but a Lidl store manager offered her only £3 because the coupon was a competition prize, meaning it had no monetary value.

We didn't think this was fair, so we asked the company to clarify. It said that because the lamp is faulty Jenny should contact its customer service team instead (020 3966 5566), rather than ask a store manager. This turned out to be good advice. After Jenny explained the situation, Lidl agreed to contact the lamp's manufacturer, and it's going to send her a replacement.

While we're glad Jenny will now get a working lamp, it shouldn't have taken her so long. Lidl needs to train its store managers better. In particular, they should know that if an item bought with a coupon (partially or fully) proves to be faulty, they must refund the value of the coupon, or reissue a new coupon of the same amount.

However, all retailers can refuse to accept coupons when you purchase because legally they are seen as an 'invitation to treat' and don't count as an offer.

Can a retailer resell returned goods as 'new'?

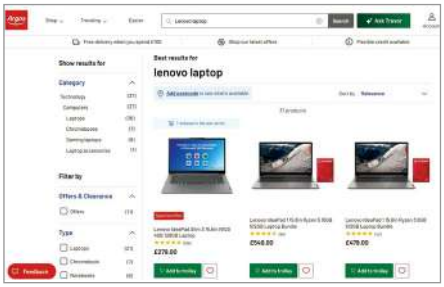
Q I seem to have the same problem as John Barker (Issue 706), who thought Currys had sold him a second-hand Lenovo laptop as new. I bought a Lenovo laptop from Argos on 11 March, but when I registered it Lenovo told me the 12-month warranty would expire in five months. I've often wondered what happens to goods that are returned to retailers. Can they be resold as 'new'?

Steve Pack

A This is a very good question. Retailers can resell returned goods as new only if they haven't been used. What counts as 'use' is open to debate, but legally you're allowed to open the box and switch on a device, despite retailers often objecting.

However, retailers can't describe a returned device as new if it's been used for a particular purpose, such as emailing, browsing the web, downloading software and more. In such cases, retailers must specify the device is second-hand or has been used. Likewise, if they've repaired a device they must sell it as 'refurbished'.

Both John and Steve's laptops were registered before they bought them, supporting their suspicions they've been



sold second-hand devices as new. We're waiting to hear back from Currys, Argos and Lenovo to find out what's happened. There are worrying signs that it's a widespread problem.

CASE ONGOING

Must I give a poor service the chance to put things right?

Q If I buy a faulty product, I know that after 30 days the retailer has the right to offer a replacement or attempt a repair. But what about poor services? Can I ask for an immediate refund, or is the company allowed a chance to fix things, no matter how bad their first attempt was?

Mark Truman

A Generally yes, you must give the company a chance to put things right. But there are instances when you can demand a refund straight away. These include when it's going to take too long for the company to rectify the problem, or if they messed up so badly that it will be impossible for them to fix.

You can also seek a refund if for whatever reason it's inconvenient for you to hire the company again. Bear in mind that the company might offer you a partial refund, reflecting the original service you received, however sloppy it was. Alternatively, if you haven't paid yet for the service, you can refuse to do so or ask for a discount.

Also remember never to say immediately that you're satisfied with work, in case problems show up later. Companies can use this against you if you try to seek redress.

CASE CLOSED

CREDIT WHERE IT'S DUE

Amazon issued fast refund when phone didn't arrive

On 1 March I ordered a Samsung phone from Amazon. The confirmation email said delivery would be later in the month, which was much longer than I'd expected. Then I realised that the phone would be supplied by an Amazon partner supplier.

I subsequently received a new delivery date of 8 March. However, I was concerned that the tracking information didn't show that the order was out for delivery. When it didn't arrive I contacted the supplier and received a revised delivery date of 17 March, with a message that I'd be refunded if this was missed. Again, nothing arrived.

I asked Amazon to call me, which it did within five minutes. The helpful assistant said he'd contact the supplier, but I reminded him my contract was with Amazon, not with the supplier. He said he would deal with the claim that day, and within five minutes my refund had been processed.

Arnold Kingston

Has a company impressed you with its customer service? Please let us know: editor@computeractive.co.uk

Contact
Amazon

- **Online** www.snipca.com/54416
- **Phone** 0800 496 1081

Grow Your Family Tree

If your British Army ancestors were tried for an offence, follow **Richard Holt's** advice to...

Search courts martial and desertion records

If an ancestor in the army committed offences under military law, they may have been tried at a court martial. These courts could be held at home or overseas and produced a number of records including papers, proceedings and registers. Soldiers deserting was also a big problem, so these cases were often reported in newspapers.

Access Ancestry's 1806-1930 registers

To start, read this guide from the National Archives explaining the different types of courts martial: www.snipca.com/54276. Some of the registers from these in the WO 68, WO 92 and WO 213 collections have been digitised. See what's available online at www.snipca.com/54277.

If you subscribe to Ancestry, you can access indexes to the registers in the 'UK, Naval and Military Courts Martial Registers, 1806-1930' collection (www.snipca.com/54278). To see images of the registers you'll also need to subscribe to Fold3, which is owned by Ancestry. There's a seven-day free trial, after which it costs $79.95 (about £62) a year or $7.95 (£6.16) a month – see www.snipca.com/54280. Fold3 records are available at no further cost if you have an Ancestry All Access subscription (www.snipca.com/54342), which costs £24.99 a month or £224.99 a year.

Search courts martial records on Ancestry then click through to Fold3 to see the original image

I searched the Ancestry index for the surname Wingrove, which features in my family tree. I clicked on the result for James Wingrove, which told me he was tried on 21 November 1892 (1 in our screenshot above) at Cork 2, and that he belonged to the York and Lancaster Regiment 3. Clicking the Fold3.com link 4 took me to the original record on that site.

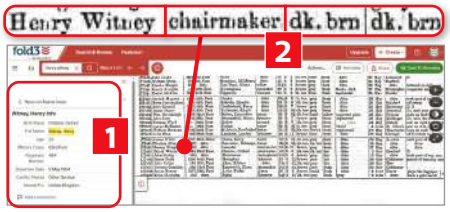
You can also search entries in courts martial registers from WO 90/3-4, which are not included in the Ancestry index. This is thanks to Canadian historian Amy Milne-Smith, who has published a free downloadable Excel spreadsheet containing transcriptions of the registers: www.snipca.com/54281. It contains an additional 6,182 register entries dated 1851-1900.

Browse *Police Gazette* records of deserters

Details of deserters were published in the newspapers *Hue and Cry* and the *Police Gazette*. Ancestry subscribers can search the latter (1812-1927) at www.snipca.com/54331) though again you'll need a Fold3 subscription to see the actual records.

When you search for an ancestor you'll see their personal details appear on the left (1 in our screenshot below). These include the regiment they belonged to and their number, as well as desertion date.

There's more information in the record on the right, including occupation, height, and eye and hair colour. The person we searched for, Henry Witney, was a 5ft6in chairmaker, with dark-brown hair and eyes 2.



Fold3 lists personal details on the left, and more information in the record on the right

Your **Genealogy** Problems Solved

Before he died 20 years ago, my father said he filled in a questionnaire after being released from Stalag X-B in Germany, where he was kept as a prisoner of war. Would these be available to search anywhere?
Roy Kennedy

You might find your father in Ancestry's 'UK and Allied Countries, World War II Liberated Prisoner of War Questionnaires, 1945-1946', which were published in late 2023. Visit www.snipca.com/54270 then search by name and date of birth. It would help if you knew your father's unit, service branch, service number and rank. You can search for free, but you'll need a subscription to view the questionnaire.

Have a genealogy question for Richard? Email letters@computeractive.co.uk with 'Grow Your Family Tree' in the subject line.

Next issue: Find ancestors who were freemasons

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www.snipca.com/54456
What you need: Windows 10 or 11

Wintoys is one of our favourite tools for optimising, customising and removing junk from Windows, but it's been a while since its last big update. So we're pleased to report that the new version of the app (it's available from the Microsoft Store rather than as a traditional program) has been worth the wait and is packed with useful new features.

A new 'welcome experience' introduces you to Wintoys, explaining the benefits of the app and encouraging you to create a system restore point in case of problems. This is complemented by a new Restoration option in Wintoys' Settings, which instantly reverts any changes you've made.

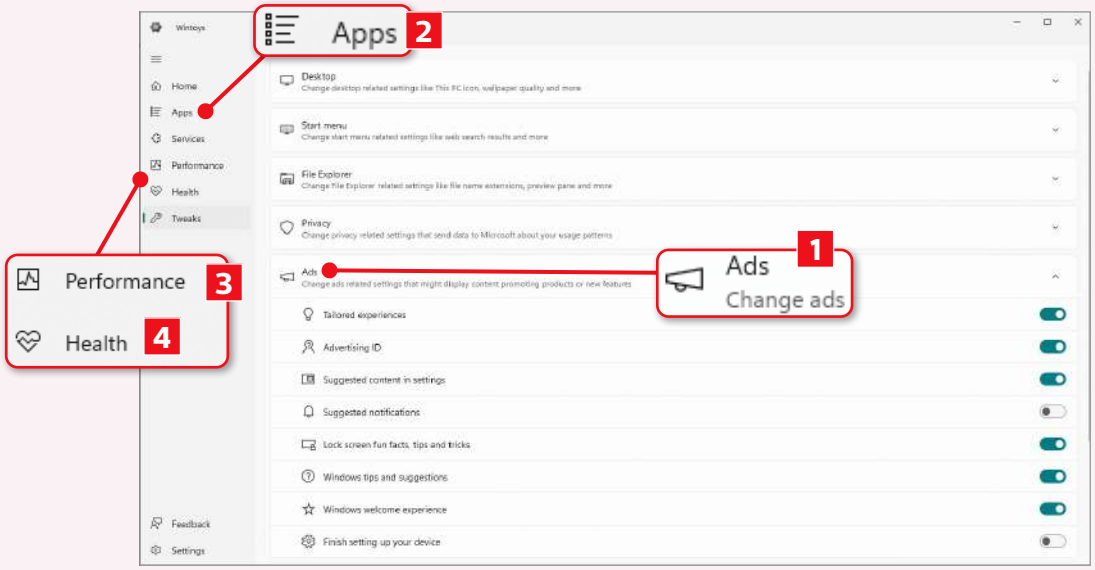
The Home screen has been updated to provide at-a-glance information about different elements of your system when you hover your cursor over the relevant cards. For example, the Storage card shows you how much free space is available on each drive and partition, while the Windows card tells you the current version of your operating system.

Most of the new options in Wintoys can be found in the Tweaks section. These include switching the new File Explorer in Windows 11 to 'Classic view' and removing the Home and Gallery shortcuts from its left-hand menu. In both Windows 10 and 11, you can now show file extensions and hidden files without refreshing File Explorer.

A new Superuser option includes advanced settings such as enabling God Mode and reducing the number of notifications from User Account Control. You can also now add seconds to the taskbar clock without restarting File Explorer.

Perhaps the most interesting addition unlocks the ability to uninstall Microsoft's Edge browser. Click 'System' on the Tweaks screen, select 'Digital markets act' and restart your PC. When you go to the Apps screen in the Windows Settings app (not within Wintoys itself), the Uninstall button for Edge will no longer be greyed out.

See our Cover Feature on page 50 for more Windows tweaks.



1 Wintoys makes it easy to block Microsoft's annoying ads and 'suggestions' in Windows 10 and 11. Select 'Ads' on the Tweaks screen to disable options including 'Tailored experiences', 'Advertising ID' and 'Windows tips and suggestions'.

2 You can use Wintoys to uninstall software by clicking the Apps tab in the left-hand menu, then clicking the three-dot button next to a program or app and choosing Uninstall. If you're unsure what an item is, click Search to look up information about it online.

3 Wintoys includes a handy startup manager, which lets you prevent certain programs and apps from running automatically when Windows starts. Click the Performance tab followed by 'Startup apps' and deselect unwanted entries in the list.

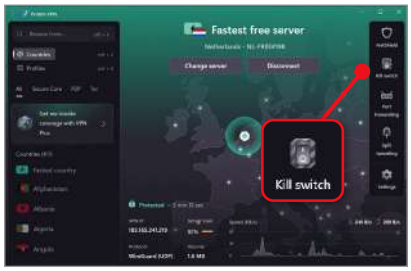
4 To remove junk files from Windows, click the Health tab, select Cleanup and click the bin icon next to Junk. Choose which data to delete, such as 'Temporary files', 'Windows updates' and 'Browser caches'. The latter now includes Brave and Opera.

VPN

Proton VPN 4.1.10

www.snipca.com/54474

What you need: Windows 10 or 11



Proton has redesigned its VPN app for Windows (plus its mobile apps, which we'll cover in our next issue) to make it easier to use. Its powerful privacy tools are now instantly accessible from the home screen. They include its NetShield feature for blocking ads and trackers; 'Split tunneling' for limiting VPN protection to specific sites and apps; and 'Kill switch' (see screenshot) for protecting your IP address when you lose your encrypted connection. However, only the latter is available to free users. Proton subscribers can also now create profiles that automatically connect to favourite servers. An improved map shows the precise location of the server you're connected to and its current speed – note, however, that the free plan doesn't let you select a location. Additionally, you can now apply a light theme in the app's Settings.

IMAGE VIEWER

PicView 3.1.0

www.snipca.com/54457

What you need: Windows 10 or 11

At its most basic, PicView lets you browse pictures in a folder at their original size, but by digging into the options in its toolbars and right-click menu you can perform all manner of useful actions. These include viewing photos in a slideshow, side by side or in a strip of thumbnails; cropping, resizing and rotating images; and setting pictures as your desktop wallpaper. Click the magic-wand icon on the bottom toolbar to access the Effects option (see screenshot), which lets you adjust the brightness and contrast of photos, and apply filters including blur, pencil sketch and old movie. PicView supports a wide range of image formats and even lets you view pictures stored in ZIP and 7z archives. The latest version speeds up its loading times and improves its Gallery view – press G to switch to this.

£ SHOULD I PAY FOR...?

Choose the right version of software

Stardock CursorFX

www.snipca.com/54475

Price: £4.99 **Free trial:** 30 days

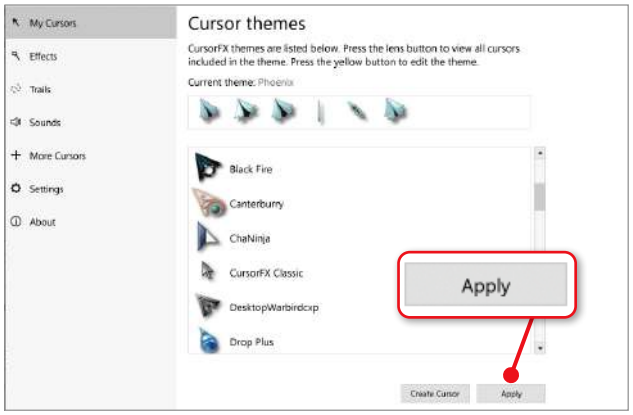
What you need: Windows 10 or 11

If you're bored of pointing and clicking with the same old white-arrow cursor or find the default Windows pointer difficult to see, CursorFX offers a host of more interesting and accessible designs. Unlike many free cursor packs you can download from the web, it's completely safe to use and its changes are easy to undo.

On the My Cursors tab, you can choose from more than two dozen animated cursors – some with quirky designs that resemble drops of water, grinding gears and spaceships, while others are more practical. Click the lens button next to a cursor to view all the variations within that theme, such as for when you click a web link, select text or crop an image. Click 'Apply' (see screenshot) to set that cursor theme – press Ctrl+Shift+C to restore the Windows default.

CursorFX also lets you customise the trails that appear when you move the cursor to show, for example, bubbles or smoke, and apply effects to specific actions such as when you double-click the left or right mouse button. Interestingly, you can also apply sounds to mouse actions, ranging from distinct clicks to musical noises.

Select 'Settings' to customise the colour, size and opacity of cursors, and adjust the smoothness of their movement. You can download thousands of additional designs from www.snipca.com/54483.



OUR VERDICT: Pay for it

Though not an essential program, if you want to customise your cursor, you won't find a better tool than CustomFX. It only costs a fiver, is very easy to use and also lets you design your own cursor themes by importing PNG files.

What should I download?

We advise you which software and apps to use

How can I erase photo metadata?

Q In my part-time job I have to upload lots of photos taken with my camera to social-media sites and forums. I make sure there are no personal details in them, but I'm aware that they contain metadata that could give away details like location and when the photo was taken. Can I erase this before uploading?

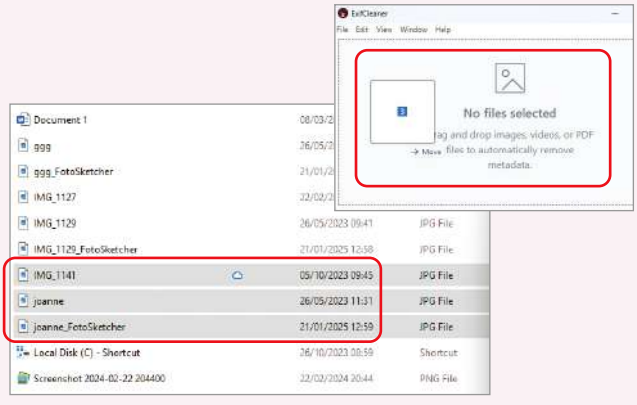
Liz Barton

A Yes, you can do this either on your phone, or on your computer. To do the former, install Photo Metadata Remover for Android (www.snipca.com/50166) and Exif Metadata for iOS (www.snipca.com/50167) – both are free.

You can remove metadata within Windows by right-clicking the file, then selecting Properties followed by the Details tab. Now click 'Remove Properties and Personal Information' at the bottom, then 'Remove the following properties from this file'. Finally, tick what you want to erase, then click OK. This removes lots of data, including time and location, and might be enough for you.

However, ExifCleaner (https://exifcleaner.com) is more powerful because it removes every last inch of metadata. It's also easier to use. Instead of all the clicking described above, you simply drag and drop files into the program's box (see screenshot). It works with images, videos and PDFs. The #Exif Before and After columns show you how much metadata was in the image, and how much is remaining (it should be zero). ExifCleaner overwrites the original file, so you don't need to download it afresh.

It's not been updated since 2021, but it's still safe. Visit www.snipca.com/54286 then click the 'ExifCleaner-3.6.0.exe' link under Assets.



Can I print web pages without the usual clutter?

Q I have to print a lot of web pages, but they all contain clutter like adverts and banners that I don't need. I'm sure there's a program that could remove these before printing, but would a browser extension be quicker?

Chris Rogers

A Yes, it would be and we recommended the excellent Print Edit WE (Chromium www.snipca.com/50428; Firefox www.snipca.com/50429). Click its toolbar icon (1 in our screenshot), then hover over any elements you want to remove and click them. A red tint and dotted border will be added to them 2. Now click Delete and they'll disappear 3. Alternatively, to print only selected elements, click Delete Except or Hide Except.

How can I keep my laptop cool?

Q I've just bought a refurbished Lenovo laptop that gets very hot. I might return it because this doesn't seem normal, but first I want to know whether there's any software that can cool a laptop. Any suggestions?

Damien Grainger

A Try Camomile (https://camomileapp.com), which was among our readers' top 20 programs of 2024 (see Issue 700's Cover Feature – buy a back issue at www.snipca.com/54285). It measures your PC's CPU, GPU and SSD temperature, then cools it when you turn on Cooling Mode (1 in our screenshot) – you can also set a keyboard shortcut to do this. You'll see the overall temperature at the top 2.

Email us your questions at letters@computeractive.co.uk

Named & Shamed

Keumars Afifi-Sabet puts the boot into tech villains, jargon-spouting companies and software trying to trick you

SOFTWARE WARNING!

‘Have I been pawned?’s nasty typosquatting

What difference can a mistyped ‘a’ make? Quite a lot actually, as reader Mel Taylor recently found out. He thought he’d typed https://haveibeenpwned.com – the invaluable database of stolen email addresses and passwords run by security guru Troy Hunt. But he accidentally added an ‘a’ to make it pawned, and ended up somewhere far less helpful.

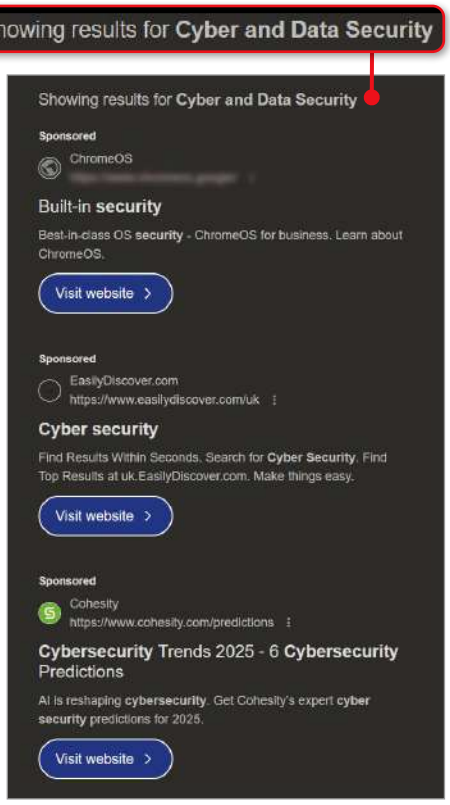
The site showed a warning that impersonated Microsoft and claimed that his PC was corrupted. When I visited the site (see screenshot right), it showed the Edge logo 1 and prompted me to take a ‘Microsoft Edge security check’ 2 – whatever that meant. Clicking ‘Allow’ 3 would not have been a good idea.

When I tried again later I found a page with sponsored search results for ‘Cyber and Data Security’ (see screenshot far right).

I dug deeper and found the site is managed by a US firm called Bodis, which specialises in “smart domain monetization”. In other words, somebody bought the URL and paid Bodis to fill it to the brim with dodgy links and adverts. This is classic typosquatting – where scammers exploit a misspelt web address. Famous examples include Bitwariden, Goggle, Faceboook and Microosft.

To avoid the scam, type the correct URL above (or our most recent shortened version: www.snipca.com/54375) very carefully then bookmark it.

Has Keumars been ‘pwned’? He would’ve been had he clicked ‘Allow’


Showing results for Cyber and Data Security
Showing results for Cyber and Data Security
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Typosquatting scams typically stuff pages with dodgy links and adverts

WHAT ARE THEY TALKING ABOUT?

WHAT THEY SAY

Facebook www.snipca.com/54372

“Connecting with friends has been a part of Facebook since it launched. Over the years, Facebook evolved to meet changing needs and created best-in-class experiences across Groups, Video, Marketplace and more, but the magic of friends has fallen away. We’ll be adding several ‘OG’ Facebook experiences throughout the year, beginning with the revamped Friends tab.”

WHAT THEY MEAN

We’re too cool to say ‘original’, so we’ll use an abbreviation that no one uses anymore. No wonder we don’t have any friends.

KEUMARS’ VILLAINS OF THE FORTNIGHT

Parcel-stealing Birmingham gang

If a laptop you ordered a few years ago never arrived, it might have been nabbed by a parcel-stealing gang from Birmingham. Between September 2022 and February 2023 the eight-strong team working at a courier firm in Kingsbury redirected items to addresses under their control.

They also stole PCs, TVs and electric bikes, worth £820,000. The company became suspicious and intercepted some of the deliveries. Police found stolen items in some of the gang members’ homes, and more than £37,000 in cash.

They’ve been jailed for over 30 years combined, though we’ve chosen to picture only Marius Marin for two reasons. One, he received the joint longest sentence (six years for conspiracy to steal). And two, he’s absconded to Romania and hasn’t been seen since. If you’re over there, keep an eye out. You’ll see the rest of the gang at www.snipca.com/54374.

Credit: Warwickshire Police

DESKTOP PC | **£1,924** from Wired2Fire www.snipca.com/54359

Wired2Fire HAL 9000 Compact PC

Game changer

Gaming PCs tend to come in larger cases, offering plenty of room to house all the hardware and cooling components they require. Wired2Fire has squeezed its HAL 9000 into a relatively small ('compact') box – 377x185x295mm (HxWxD) – that should sit neatly to the side or under your desk.

> "Played 4K games with Ultra or High graphics settings at an excellent frame rate"

The Cooler Master NR2300P Max V2 chassis is finished in an anodised grey that looks much better in the flesh than in our photos. The front-mounted USB ports (one USB-C, two USB-A) sit neatly next to the power button and a 3.5mm audio jack socket. Most of the time during our tests the HAL 9000 ran near silently, with the fans disturbing the peace only when we pushed the processor or graphics card to their limits when playing games.

The PC is built around the AMD Ryzen 7 9700X processor, backed up by 32GB of RAM and a nifty 2TB SSD. Our test unit also had an Nvidia RTX 4070 Ti graphics card, but that's fallen out of stock and has been replaced – at the time of writing it came with an RTX 5070 Ti, which will provide an even faster performance than our tests show here.

That said, the AMD Ryzen 7 9700X was already one of the fastest we've tested to date – outmatched only by the Intel Core Ultra 9 185H chip in the PCSpecialist Nebula Goliath, but that cost nearly £500 more and is no longer available on PCSpecialist's website.

We tested the HAL 9000 with four current games, played at 4K with Ultra or High graphics settings. It managed an average frame rate of 106 frames per second, which is an excellent result at this level of resolution. With its newer graphics card we'd expect this to improve significantly.

The main downside of buying a gaming PC in a smaller case is the space restrictions. This means there are no spare PCIe expansion slots inside, and the smaller backplate limits the room for ports (pictured left). There are three USB 3.2 ports, two USB 2.0, and one more USB-C, as well as a 2.5Gb Ethernet port. Wireless connectivity is provided by Wi-Fi 6E and Bluetooth 5.3.

If you're hoping that such an expensive PC will last, then the five-year warranty will be reassuring. The first two years covers collect and return, which includes parts and labour. The remaining three years are labour-only, where you will need to pay courier costs. Wired2Fire also promises lifetime phone support.

While the price is at the upper limit of what most people will be prepared to pay for a new PC, we can't fault the build quality or components, which are worth paying for if you want a state-of-the-art gaming machine.

SPECIFICATIONS
Eight-core AMD Ryzen 7 9700X processor • 32GB RAM • 16GB Nvidia GeForce RTX5070 Ti graphics card • 2TB SSD • Windows 11 Home • 377x185x295mm (HxWxD) • Five-year warranty
www.snipca.com/54359

VERDICT A powerful PC that will run your favourite games smoothly at high resolutions and maximum detail settings

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Palicomp AMD Destiny £1,350
Uses older, less powerful components to keep the price down, but can manage high-resolution gaming

LAPTOP | **£1,300** from Asus www.snipca.com/54366

Asus Vivobook 16 Flip

Bends over backwards

This versatile machine has a screen that can be angled like any standard laptop or flipped all the way back to be used as a tablet – or positioned anywhere in between.

Its OLED touchscreen measures 16in across the diagonal, and with its sharp 2880x1800-pixel resolution and 120Hz refresh rate, it's ideal for watching TV and movies in the right environment. The panel provides near-perfect contrast and covers an impressive 84 per cent of the DCI-P3 colour standard. That said, its maximum brightness level is modest, at 356cd/m², which is enough to overcome a little glare, but harsh overhead lights can make it hard to see everything onscreen.

> "A flexible laptop with a stunning screen and nifty performance"

Inside, the Flip is built around an Intel Core Ultra 7 258V processor, alongside 32GB of RAM and a 1TB SSD. This processor has eight cores, which is a step down from the 16 you'll find in the Core Ultra 7 155H chip in our previous favourite laptop, the Dell Inspiron 14 (£799 from www.snipca.com/51831, reviewed in Issue 683).

As a result, the Flip is faster on basic activities (such as office software and web browsing), but offers around the same limited performance level in more demanding tasks. As such we wouldn't recommend this for serious gaming or video editing, but it's a belter for general Windows jobs and streaming videos.

It also means battery life is great, helping to compensate for its OLED screen which drain power faster than IPS panels. We used the Flip through an average day of office work, with video calls, some light lunchtime gaming and a bit of photo editing, and it had 40 per cent charge left after eight hours. In a test that simulated typical productivity work, the battery lasted 13 hours 47 minutes. It's an impressive result for a laptop with such a large OLED screen.

With a generous selection of ports (two USB-C, one USB3.2, one HDMI, a microSD card slot, and one 3.5mm audio jack), its large keyboard with a number pad, and an expansive trackpad, this laptop is a superb all-rounder. If your budget doesn't stretch this far, the Dell Inspiron 14 remains a great, cheaper alternative, but this has won us over to become our new favourite laptop.

SPECIFICATIONS

Eight-core Intel Core Ultra 7 258V processor • 47 TOPS • 32GB RAM • Intel Arc 140V graphics • 16in 2880x1800-pixel 120Hz OLED screen • 1TB SSD • 2x USB-C ports • 1x USB3.2 port • 1x HDMI port • 1x microSD card reader • 1x 3.5mm audio jack • Wi-Fi 7 • Bluetooth 5.4 • Windows 11 Home • 17.4x355x244mm (HxWxD) • 1.78kg • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/54366

HOW WE TEST

Computeractive is owned by Future PLC, which employs a team of specialist technical reviewers. You'll often read references to our benchmark testing, which is a method of assessing products using the same criteria. For example, we test the speed of every PC and the battery life of every phone and tablet in exactly the same way. This makes our reviews authoritative, rigorous and accurate.

Future PLC also owns the magazines *Maximum PC*, *PC Pro* and *T3*, and the websites Laptop Mag (www.laptopmag.com), TechRadar (www.techradar.com) and Windows Central (www.windowscentral.com). This means we can test thousands of products before choosing the most relevant for *Computeractive*.

FAIR AND IMPARTIAL

Our writers follow strict guidelines to ensure the reviews are fair and impartial. The manufacturer has no involvement in our tests.

OUR AWARDS

We award every product that gets five stars our Buy It! stamp of approval. It means we were extremely impressed by the product, and we think you will be too.

Every product that gets a four-star review is given the Recommended award. We highly recommend these products, although they just fail to meet the high standard of our Buy It! winners.

PRICES

Our reviews contain a link to the best price we found online at the time of press.

VERDICT A versatile laptop with a stunning screen, decent performance levels and excellent battery life

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Dell Inspiron 14 Plus £799 A smaller, cheaper alternative, with similar performance but an inferior screen

EXTERNAL GRAPHICS HARDWARE | **£360** from GMKtec www.snipca.com/54378

GMKtec AD-GP1 External GPU Docking Station

In graphic detail

Most of the mini PCs we've reviewed recently have not been designed for serious video editing or gaming, because their small size doesn't allow room for the requisite graphics hardware. A couple of recent models, however, have included an OCuLink port, including the GMKtec NucBox K11 (£700 from www.snipca.com/54341, reviewed in Issue 707). An OCuLink port lets you connect an external graphics device, essentially giving you a graphics card that you can plug in whenever you need it.

> "For those who want a significant boost to editing and gaming, it's an absolute godsend"

GMKtec's AD-GP1 is a great example of this type of graphics device, and at 40x164x111mm (HxWxD) it won't take up much desk space and weighs just 708g. It comes with the cables and ports you'll need to connect it to a host PC via OCuLink or USB 4.0. It also has two HDMI and two DisplayPort sockets (pictured below), so you can easily connect it to a maximum of four monitors.

If your mini PC has an AMD processor it will already have all the drivers it needs to operate with the AMD Ryzen RX7600MXT graphics hardware inside the AD-GP1, and setup is just a matter of plugging it in. With Intel PCs you may need to download the relevant driver to make everything work, though that too is a fairly straightforward process. Power on your PC and the AD-GP1 will automatically switch on. Your PC should then run as normal, except with extra graphics processing power and a huge leap in performance levels.

In fact its RX7600MXT graphics processor is powerful enough to let you play most modern games at 1080p resolution with high detail settings. It can also support 4K monitors with refresh rates of up to 120Hz and 8K monitors up to 60Hz.

We tested it with the GMKtech EVO-X1 AI Mini PC, which has a powerful AMD Ryzen Al 9 HX 370 processor. This already has decent built-in graphics, but it switches to the graphics hardware in the AD-GP1 when connected. The difference in performance was startling.

In graphics benchmarking tests performance levels increased by 180 per cent. We were able to turn up the detail level and resolution when gaming, and play at higher frame rates, which made movement look much more fluid.

We also tested it with other software tools that could benefit from this type of boost, including Adobe Premiere Pro, Photoshop, Lightroom and DaVinci Resolve. The difference with and without the AD-GP1 was marked. Rendering 4K video footage in Premiere Pro was significantly faster, as was editing high-resolution video in DaVinci Resolve. Photoshop already worked well on this PC, but adding the AD-GP1 made every job noticeably smoother and faster.

What it didn't do was improve the performance of Windows generally. In tests that measure everyday tasks, such as office work and web browsing, the AD-GP1 brought no benefit.

Overall, the AD-GP1 provided an excellent boost to the graphics of our mini PC. However, it's worth noting that a desktop PC with a built-in graphics card is still recommended if you have the space to keep one, as the balance between price and performance will generally be better than you'll get with a mini PC and external graphics.

SPECIFICATIONS

AMD Radeon 7600MXT graphics • 1x OCuLink port • 1x USB 4.0 port • 2x DisplayPorts • 2x HDMI ports • 1x DisplayPort • 2x HDMI ports • 1x DisplayPort • 40x164x111mm (HxWxD) • 708g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/54378

VERDICT An external graphics card for compatible mini PCs that provides a significant performance boost to video editing and gaming

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE

Minisforum MGA1 eGPU Dock Station £449 A similar device with the same graphics hardware and more USB 3.2 ports, though it lacks a USB 4.0 option

TABLET | **£400** from Honor www.snipca.com/54419

Honor Pad V9

Medium rare

Honor offers a range of Android tablets and the Pad V9 sits bang in the middle. In terms of price it's between the Honor Pad 9 (£220 from www.snipca.com/54427, reviewed in Issue 682) and our current favourite Android tablet, the Honor MagicPad2 (£500 from www.snipca.com/53150 – see page 30). Honor often has good deals, however, and we've seen the MagicPad 2 as low as £400.

> "Mid-range tablet offers handy features and a sharp screen"

The V9 is smaller than the other two, with an 11.4in screen, while the Pad 9 is 12.1in and the MagicPad2 12.3in. The V9 is perhaps aimed at those who want to replicate the feel of the standard 11in iPad (£329 from www.snipca.com/54420), but in Android. And in some ways it compares well with the iPad, given its slightly larger screen and double the storage for only around £70 more.

What you get with the iPad, however, is iPadOS, which is still slightly slicker and better supported by app developers. That said, Honor's MagicOS 9 – which is built on Android 15 – works well, and has a few apps and tools that make certain tasks much easier. It has its own Office-like productivity software, for example, that lets you convert your docs into PDFs (or other file formats), compile documents from certain apps and mark up PDFs.

The screen has a sharp 2800x1840-pixel resolution and a nifty refresh rate of up to 144Hz. Honor claims a 500cd/m² maximum brightness, although we actually measured it a fraction higher in our tests. Audio quality is also impressive, with eight speakers dotted around the edges, which helps create the sense of a spacious soundscape.

Inside there's a MediaTek Dimensity 8350 Elite processor. This isn't cutting-edge, and is fine for browsing, emailing and office work, but it struggled to run the latest games at a decent frame rate.

The camera setup is similarly modest, with a 13-megapixel rear and 8-megapixel front. They're fine for scanning documents and carrying out video calls, but don't expect sharp, detailed snaps.

The V9's 10,100mAh battery is a similar size to the iPad's, and it got us through about two days of heavy use before the tablet needed a recharge.

Overall this is an impressive tablet, but we think it still lags behind the larger Honor MagicPad2, particularly if you can catch it when it's on offer.

SPECIFICATIONS
Eight-core MediaTek Dimensity 8350 processor • 8GB RAM • 11.4in 2800x1840-pixel resolution IPS screen • 256GB storage • 13-megapixel rear camera • 8-megapixel front camera • Wi-Fi 6 • Bluetooth 5.2 • Android 15 with MagicOS 9 • 176x259x6.1mm (HxWxD) • 475g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/54419

VERDICT A decent Android alternative to the basic iPad, with useful apps, a sharp screen and impressive audio

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE
Honor MagicPad2 £500 Its larger screen is more luxurious, whether you're watching films or working. Often discounted to £400

CHOOSE THE RIGHT SPECS

Dual SIM phones

What are they?

A SIM is a small plastic card provided by your mobile-phone network that tells your phone which number to use and connects it to the network's services. Most phones use a single SIM, but some can accommodate two, so you can run two numbers from the same handset. Dual SIM phones – like the Motorola E14 (£60 from www.snipca.com/54422, pictured) don't have to be expensive.

How do they work?

With two SIMs installed you can choose which one to make calls from. This can help you to manage work and personal calls from the same phone, for example, so you don't have to carry two phones around. When a call comes in, you'll see immediately which SIM is handling it, so you can ignore work calls after office hours.

You can also control your mobile data in the same way, which can be handy when travelling. For instance, you might use a secondary local SIM in your phone while on holiday to avoid expensive roaming fees, while still receiving calls on your usual number.

What are the specs?

Some dual SIM phones have two slots where you install both SIM cards. Others offer the option of an eSIM, which is a file you can download from your phone provider that contains all the information stored on a SIM card.

Can I change them later?

Yes. The benefit of a dual SIM phone is that you can swap the SIMs as often as you like – you simply remove one SIM and replace it with another. With eSIMs you may even be able to have more than two saved at a time, so switching between multiple SIM cards is easier than ever.

SMARTPHONE | **£599** from Apple www.snipca.com/54407

Apple iPhone 16e

Core appeal

The iPhone 16e has replaced the iPhone SE, which was Apple's most affordable phone. As its name suggests, it's a closer relative to the current iPhone 16 than the SE was to previous generations. The SE typically just adopted the components and designs from older iPhones to keep its price down.

Not surprisingly then, this costs more at launch than its predecessor, which arrived on the market for £419 in 2020 (reviewed in Issue 630). The 16e costs £599 for the cheapest model, which has 128GB of storage. That's only £200 less than the cheapest iPhone 16. There are also 256GB and 512GB versions of the 16e, but at £699 and £899 respectively, they're significantly more expensive. Both options remain £200 cheaper than an iPhone 16 with the same capacity, though.

The 16e is marginally (less than 1mm) shorter and 3g lighter than the iPhone 16 but keeps most of the same design elements, including the flat outside edge (pictured left), the strong aluminium frame, an impressive IP68 rating and the new programmable Action button, which can be set to carry out functions you perform often (see them all at www.snipca.com/54429). It also has the full suite of AI tools that are exclusive to iPhone 16 models.

Its 6.1in OLED screen is much bigger and better than the 4.7in IPS screen of the iPhone SE. We measured a peak brightness level of 1028cd/m², which makes it much easier to see everything onscreen when using it outdoors.

The most obvious cost saving relates to the single rear camera, compared with two on the iPhone 16. This essentially ditches the option of ultrawide angle shots, but there's no compromise on the remaining camera, which takes great pictures in all lighting conditions.

Inside you'll find the same Apple A18 processor, and our benchmark tests showed the basic performance level is identical, which means navigating iOS in everyday use feels snappy. However, Apple has reduced the graphics capability on the 16e, so it's not as slick when playing the latest games.

In battery tests the iPhone 16e lasted 12 hours 41 minutes between charges, which is almost as good as the standard iPhone. Charging is also quick and can be done wirelessly, though it lacks a MagSafe connector for magnetically clipping on to compatible wireless chargers.

SPECIFICATIONS

Six-core Apple A18 processor • 8GB RAM • 128GB, 256GB or 512GB storage • 6.1in 60Hz 2532x1170-pixel AMOLED screen • 48-megapixel rear camera • 12-megapixel front-facing camera • Wi-Fi 6 • Bluetooth 5.3 • iOS 18.3 • 147x72x7.8mm (HxWxD) • 167g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/54407

VERDICT One way to get the iPhone 16's features for less, with only a few minor compromises

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE

Google Pixel 9a £499

Google's new low-cost Pixel alternative is cheaper and promises to be excellent value for money – we'll test it soon

WHAT SHOULD I BUY? We solve your buying dilemmas

How good is the Dell OptiPlex Micro 7020 PC?

Q I am a volunteer at our local library, where we've started using Dell OptiPlex Micro 7020 PCs. I assume our IT people are reasonably savvy when purchasing equipment, but do you have any info on the merits of this PC, as I am looking to replace my ageing desktop PC?

Neil Howells

A We tested the Dell OptiPlex Micro 7000 in Issue 657 and awarded it four out of five stars. The 7020 (pictured) is an updated version. It looks largely identical, though the allocation of ports have changed – an HDMI socket has been added; two of its three DisplayPorts removed; and it has one less USB 3.2 port but adds two USB 2.0 ports.

It's available in a range of configurations. If you want it to last as long as possible, we'd recommend the most expensive version you can afford. The costliest specification currently has an Intel Core i5 14500T processor, 16GB of RAM and a 512GB SSD, and costs £645 from www.snipca.com/54410. It comes with a one-year warranty, but we'd expect it to last way beyond that. It will be fine for office work and web browsing, but we wouldn't recommend it for video editing or serious gaming.

Do you need advice on what you should buy? Email us at letters@computeractive.co.uk

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COOLING PAD | **£24** from Amazon www.snipca.com/54389

Liangstar Laptop Cooling Pad

The heat is off

The Liangstar Laptop Cooling Pad is a stand designed to prevent your laptop from overheating while it's working (or playing) hard. It has six fans of varying sizes – three 100mm, two 80mm and a 70mm in diameter – and is compatible with any laptop with a screen between 12 and 17.3in, though it works best between 15.6 and 17in.

It's well constructed, with a sharp, angular design and feels comfortable. While testing we were able to tilt it to the correct angle for our wrists. The monochrome lighting is more subtle than the RGB type common to many cooling pads.

SPECIFICATIONS

3x 100mm fans, 2x 80mm fans, 1x 70mm fan • Fits laptops with screens from 15.6-17in • 2x USB 2.0 ports • Suitable for desk and lap use • 30x420x300mm (HxWxD) • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/54389

We put it through its paces using a gaming laptop – an Acer Predator Helios 300 with an Nvidia GeForce RTX 3080 graphics card. We ran tests that pushed the laptop to its limits in an attempt to raise its internal temperature. After running this for 15 minutes without the cooling pad, the temperature rose by 31.9°C. We switched it off, allowed it to cool down naturally, then ran the test again, this time with the cooling pad in place. It did the trick. From the same base temperature and running for the same length of time, the cooling pad limited the temperature increase to an impressive 15.3°C.

Given its effectiveness, we were pleasantly surprised by how quiet the fans were. Ten minutes into the test we used a sound meter to measure noise levels – from both a few inches away and at around head height. We recorded 59dB and 45dB respectively, which is acceptable, and roughly equivalent to the fans of the Acer Helios 300 itself.

VERDICT A low-cost cooling pad that works hard to significantly reduce the temperature of your laptop

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE TopMate C12 Laptop Cooling Pad £30 Has a control panel with a screen and a phone holder, but costs more and is no better at cooling

EARBUDS | **£100** from Amazon www.snipca.com/54390

Huawei FreeArc

In the loop

If you don't like sticking tiny buds deep into your earholes to stop them from falling out, but want to avoid big, bulky headphones, then open-ear earbuds could be the sweet spot you're looking for. These clip around your ear, hanging close to but not inside the ear canal.

Huawei's FreeArc buds have a standard open-ear design: the main body is similar to standard buds but this is attached to a loop that circles and slips behind the ear. Each one weighs 8.9g, so they aren't the lightest buds we've tested, but this is barely noticeable when worn.

We were very impressed with the audio quality. Open-ear buds don't typically sound as good as in-ear buds because they don't sit as close to the ear drum, but these are the best we've ever tested. It separates different sounds effectively, keeping them delicately tuned and maintaining a bristling energy. We often forgot we weren't wearing regular tighter-fitting buds.

There are a few downsides, though. The earbuds themselves last seven hours between charges, but the case only provides 28 hours of total listening time, which is relatively short. It will get you through a full day of listening, but will need regular recharging if you use them a lot.

We also found it hard to install the app on Android, requiring us to download the Huawei AI Life app from Huawei's own AppGallery (which itself had to be sideloaded on to our device from an APK file) because it wasn't available on the Google Play Store. The process is much easier on Apple devices. The buds work without the app, but it does provide extra features such as sound profiles and the ability to locate the buds should you misplace them.

SPECIFICATIONS

17mm dynamic drivers • 28-hour battery life with case • USB-C cable • IP57 ingress protection • Bluetooth 5.2 • 8.9g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/54390

VERDICT High-quality, comfortable over-ear buds at a reasaonble price, but there are a few drawbacks, particularly for Android users

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Sony WH-CH720N £100 Standard headphones for over the ear at a similar price, but they offer noise-cancelling

SMART TV | From **£29** a month from Sky www.snipca.com/54430

Sky Glass Gen 2

Dish out

In 2021, Sky shook up its entire offering with Sky Glass. It's both a 4K-resolution TV set and a subscription to Sky's TV services, delivered through your broadband connection rather than via a satellite dish.

Now Sky has launched Glass Gen 2, which replaces the previous version. As before, there's a choice of Sky-branded TVs in three different sizes (43in, 55in or 65in), and you can choose whether to buy the screen outright or pay monthly. Then there's a monthly subscription to pay on top, to get the usual Sky channel packs.

> "Has a better screen and more speakers to boost audio quality"

Breaking those costs down, you pay a £20 setup fee, then with a 48-month contract, you can pay £14 a month for the 43in TV; £19 a month for the 55in; or £24 a month for the 65in. You can shorten that to 24 months by paying double the monthly cost. Either way, the TV is yours at the end of the contract. If you'd prefer, you can buy the TV upfront for £699, £949 or £1199 respectively, which also forgoes the setup fee.

You also need to pay for your Sky package. The basic Sky Essential TV starts at £15 a month on a two-year contract, but there are plenty of other tempting add-ons, such as the Ultra HDR and Dolby Atmos pack, Sky Cinema, Sky Sports and Sky Kids.

Once you have decided what you want, however, Sky Glass is easy to order and set up, which the delivery team does for you.

We tested the 55in model, which has a superior screen with an improved anti-reflection finish and higher brightness levels, while audio quality has been boosted through extra built-in speakers.

It's a smart-looking design that's available in silver, grey, or blue. This isn't the very best TV you can buy for the money but that isn't really the point. What you're actually buying is an integrated TV system that provides immediate access to Sky and any streaming service you can think of, from Netflix to BBC iPlayer.

What you really need to think about is whether Glass will be the best Sky option for you. If you already have a good TV, a Sky Stream box can plug into its HDMI port to deliver similar content – and this will cost you less overall. And if you have Sky Glass 1, there's not enough here to justify upgrading.

SPECIFICATIONS

43in, 55in or 65in versions • 4K Quantum Dot display • HDR • Built-in Dolby Atmos soundbar • 3x HDMI ports • 2x USB-C ports • Wi-Fi 6 • 780x1229x48mm (HxWxD, 55in screen including stand) • 21.9kg (including stand) • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/54430

VERDICT Improved TV hardware with Sky's programming, delivered without installing a satellite dish

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Sky Stream £15 a month If you're happy with your existing TV, this provides a similar service you can plug into your existing set

DO I REALLY NEED...

An audio streamer for old speakers?

What is it?

Swedish company Atonemo has announced its £99 Streamplayer, a pocket-sized device that streams audio to any hi-fi system or speaker.

How does it work?

The device has a USB-C port to power it and an AUX port that connects to any speaker or amp. It then connects wirelessly to your phone, from where you can control playback and adjust the settings. It supports Apple AirPlay 2, Spotify Connect, Google Cast, Tidal Connect and Auracast, so will work with virtually any music streaming service.

What's the catch?

There aren't many. It's good value, the design is classy, and it's easy to use. There's no launch date yet, but you can sign up for updates at www.atonemo.com.

So can I do without it?

Yes, if you've already ditched your old hi-fi system. Otherwise, it's a great way to stream music through it.

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Our pick of products that have won the Buy It award

LAPTOP

NEW ENTRY

Asus Vivobook 16 Flip
£1,300 from www.snipca.com/54366
Tested Issue 708

Versatile device that can be used like a laptop or flipped over like a tablet. It's faster than the Dell Inspiron (below) with office software and web browsing, has a stunning screen, and lasts nearly 14 hours. Worth the money.

ALTERNATIVE Dell Inspiron 14 Plus Comes with 16GB RAM, 512GB SSD and a 14in 2240x1400-pixel screen. Great value. £699 from www.snipca.com/51831

DESKTOP PC

Palicomp AMD Cobra
£400 from www.snipca.com/43515
Tested Issue 643

This fast PC is a mouth-watering bargain, with 16GB of RAM, a 2TB SSD and a six-core processor – though it lacks USB-C ports and built-in Wi-Fi.

ALTERNATIVE Wired2Fire Ultima WS Home Office Workstation Blisteringly fast PC, powered by an overclocked eight-core processor and 1TB SSD. £675 from www.snipca.com/41500

APPLE iPAD

Apple iPad 10.9in
£329 from www.snipca.com/53977
Tested Issue 646

The price of the 10th-generation iPad, released in 2022, has fallen far enough that it's the best-value model. The link above takes you to Apple, but also check John Lewis where it's been as low as £309.

ALTERNATIVE iPad mini 7 The 2024 version of the mini improves the colour accuracy on the 8.3in screen and has a more powerful processor. £499 from www.snipca.com/52573

ANDROID TABLET

PRICE DROP

Honor MagicPad2
£399 from www.snipca.com/53150
Tested Issue 700

With a larger screen (12.3in) than the Galaxy Tab S9 (below) and a similar performance for less money, Honor's MagicPad2 is a superb new tablet. The OLED screen has a strikingly sharp resolution, and yet battery life is a mighty 18 hours.

ALTERNATIVE Samsung Galaxy Tab S9 Has a much brighter screen than its predecessor, making it ideal for watching TV. Also has a faster processor, speeding up tasks. £799 (128GB) from www.snipca.com/50039

APPLE iPHONE

Apple iPhone 16
£799 from www.snipca.com/53981
Tested Issue 695

This is the best new iPhone for years, boosted by a processor that's as fast as much more expensive models. The screen is excellent, while the new Camera Control button gives lots of ways to take photos.

ALTERNATIVE iPhone 14 Now heavily discounted, this remains a speedy phone with great features and an impressive camera. £499 (128GB) from www.snipca.com/53982

ANDROID PHONE

PRICE DROP

Google Pixel 7a
£279 from www.snipca.com/53388
Tested Issue 660

A cheaper version of Google's flagship phone, this uses AI to add clarity to photos, and lasts an impressive 10 hours. Has a fast processor and 8GB RAM to supercharge performance.

ALTERNATIVE Nothing Phone 2a Don't be put off by the odd name. This has a distinctive design, superb camera and decent battery life. From a UK company too. £279 from www.snipca.com/49930

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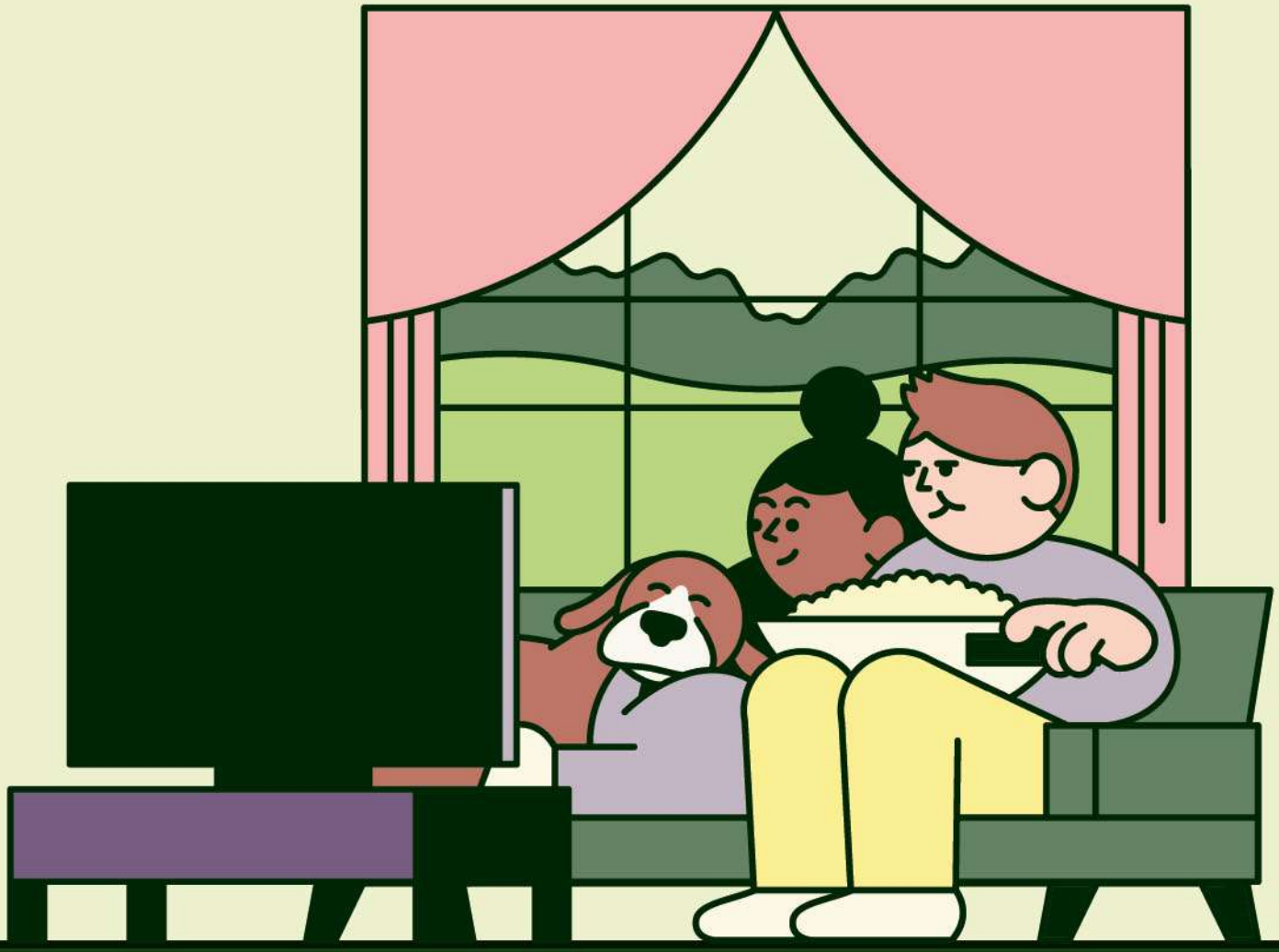

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Buy It

Our pick of products that have won the Buy It award

MINI PC

GMKtec NucBox K11
£700 from www.snipca.com/54341
Tested Issue 707

A fast and powerful machine, but what really sets it apart are the ports letting you upgrade it – such as the OCuLink connection for graphics cards. Also has six USB ports, 32GB RAM (upgradeable to 96GB) and a 1TB SSD.

ALTERNATIVE Geekom A8 Too small to accommodate many ports, but makes up for it with a 2TB SSD and SD card slot for adding storage. £719 from www.snipca.com/51157

EBOOK READER

Amazon Kindle Paperwhite
£160 from www.snipca.com/52730
Tested Issue 698

The sixth version of the Paperwhite has a larger screen (7in), faster page turns and longer battery life (12 weeks – up from 10). Its glare-free finish means you can easily read it in bright sunlight, and its 300ppi resolution makes text a joy to read.

ALTERNATIVE Kobo Libra Kobo's first colour e-reader, with over 4,000 tones to make illustrations and photos leap out. £210 from www.snipca.com/50192

SECURITY SOFTWARE

Norton 360 Premium
£19.99 from www.snipca.com/33247
Tested Issue 629

Norton has always performed strongly in our antivirus tests, regularly making the top three. Owned by US firm NortonLifeLock, it's available at a discount on our Software Store. Use the link above for a 10-device, two-year licence. Other versions are available, including Norton 360 for Gamers.

ALTERNATIVE Bitdefender Total Security Another top performer that we're offering at a discount. £24.99 from www.snipca.com/41141

WEBCAM

Logitech C925e Business Webcam
£65 from www.snipca.com/50751
Tested Issue 608

Despite the name, this webcam is also great for home users. Its standout feature is automatically adjusting itself to keep your picture looking sharp. It offers a 78-degree field of view, which is fine for everyday video chats with one person in front of the camera.

ALTERNATIVE Creative Live Cam Sync 4K Affordable 4K webcam with high-quality video that can also capture voice from a distance. £38 from www.snipca.com/51577

PC MONITOR

Philips 27E1N1600AE
£200 from www.snipca.com/54190
Tested Issue 692

An affordable 27in monitor with a sharp resolution, impressive image quality and a sturdy build. It has an HDMI port, a USB-C port and two USB 3.0. The hefty base means you can raise and tilt the monitor easily using just one hand.

ALTERNATIVE Asus ROG Strix XG27ACS Another excellent 27in monitor with 1440p resolution and a fast refresh rate aimed at gamers. £329 from www.snipca.com/49898

SOLID-STATE DRIVE

Corsair MP600 Pro LPX 1TB
£79 from www.snipca.com/52658
Tested Issue 630

In our tests, this M.2 SSD hit speeds of 7,364MB/s and 6,870MB/s when reading and writing data – astonishingly fast scores. It's compatible with the new PCIe 4.0 standard, which is twice as fast as PCIe 3.0. The 1TB model costs £79; 2TB costs £135.

ALTERNATIVE Crucial MX500 500GB As fast as an SSD can get in the traditional 2.5in SATA format, this is a great-value upgrade. £60 from www.snipca.com/53808

COMPETITION

Win 1 of 2...

Birdfy Feeder 2 Duo video bird feeders

Winner of a Recommended award in Issue 701 (page 28), the Birdfy Feeder 2 Duo is the perfect way to keep an eye on the feathered friends in your garden. It has two cams and two angles, raising the bar for backyard birdwatching.

The main camera, located centrally, has a useful pan-and-zoom function that follow birds around the feeder for the best shot. The secondary side camera has a wider-angle lens, which helps to fit larger birds in the frame.

The species-recognition system can sound an audible alarm if a squirrel visits the table. Power for the Wi-Fi comes from a solar panel that works well even on overcast days, while video quality is excellent.

Thanks to Birdfy's upgraded algorithm, it instantly delivers perfect bird photos and wide-angle video clips straight to your Birdfy app. You'll get a 'Motion Alert' (pictured) when a bird is detected. You can then use the app to identify the species.

To enter this competition, answer the question at www.snipca.com/54360 and submit your details by midnight on 23 April. Good luck!

You can buy the **Birdfy Feeder 2 Duo** for £369.99 from www.snipca.com/53289. For more Birdfy products, including the Feeder 2 Pro and the Hum Feeder Pro (which captures slow-motion videos of birds) visit www.birdfy.com.

PRINTER

PRICE DROP

Epson EcoTank ET-2830

£189 from www.snipca.com/54466
Tested Issue 676

This has recently risen in price from £180, but it's still better value than the ET-1810 because it adds copying and scanning to its functions for £110 more. Print quality is great, especially for photos, which have crisp details, vivid colours and realistic skin tones.

ALTERNATIVE Epson EcoTank ET-1810
Not the fastest printer, but comes with enough ink for 4,500 mono and 7,500 colour pages. £150 from www.snipca.com/52191

SMART TV

Bush 43UT24SB

£199 from www.snipca.com/53637
Tested Issue 703

It's rare to find a 43in TV this cheap, especially with a superbly bright screen. Sound isn't bad either, and it offers most of the streaming services, including Freely. Its TiVo operating system is very easy to use.

ALTERNATIVE Samsung CU8000
More expensive, but has a 55in LED screen and sharp 4K resolution. Connectivity is good, with three HDMI and two USB ports. £360 from www.snipca.com/52110

ROUTER

PRICE DROP

Asus RT-AXE7800

£180 from www.snipca.com/52957
Tested Issue 665

This router has Wi-Fi 6E, so will be capable of the fastest possible speeds on the 6GHz network over the next few years. It has five Ethernet ports and also a USB 3.0 port to connect a hard drive or NAS drive.

ALTERNATIVE Synology WRX560
Our previous favourite remains an excellent choice, delivering speeds of up to 791.5Mbps. Add more units to set up mesh Wi-Fi. £211 from www.snipca.com/52051

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Issue 708

Workshops & Tips

14 pages of easy-to-follow workshops and expert tips

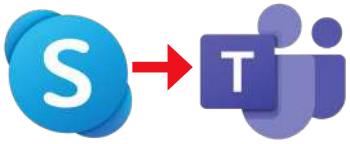
35 Switch from Skype and master Teams
38 Find faces in photos and put them in groups
40 Readers' Tips
42 Browser Tips: Add a Downloads button to the Chrome toolbar

PLUS
44 Phone & Tablet Tips
46 Make Windows Better
47 Make Office Better
48 In the Club: Send club certificates

HOW TO...

Switch from Skype and master Teams

by Nik Rawlinson



What you need: Skype account; Microsoft Teams **Time required:** One hour

After 22 years, Skype is shutting up shop. Microsoft has called time on the internet phone service, which has seen competitors like Zoom, Google Meet and Microsoft's own Teams steal much of its market share since they really came to prominence during the Covid lockdowns.

Skype was many users' first experience of internet telephony, but the system went beyond merely enabling calls. It also offered text-based group chats, let you send and receive cash, and was a handy, commitment-free option for anyone who wanted a second phone number without the cost of having a second line run into your home.

Skype's final day of operation is 5 May – after which Microsoft recommends users switch to its free version of Teams. This is built into recent versions of Windows, but if it's not already on your machine, download it from the Microsoft Store at www.snipca.com/54336.

However, while Teams replicates many of Skype's core features – like text chat and voice calls – not everything will be available. If you use Skype's incoming number service, you can no longer top up your balance. Instead, Microsoft will keep your number live until your current subscription runs out. After that, you'll only be able to make calls to other Teams users.

If you want to keep hold of your incoming number, you can transfer it by contacting a new provider to process the move. Microsoft briefly explains how to do this at www.snipca.com/54337.

Teams does give some users the option of renting a standard phone number and using it for receiving and making calls (www.snipca.com/54339). However, this is only available on Teams business subscriptions, and not the free version to which Skype users will be transferred, or the paid home-user editions available as part of Microsoft 365.

Other features that will be lost include chats between Skype accounts and Teams work or school accounts, chats between your Skype account and business users, one-on-one chats with yourself, and private conversation data.

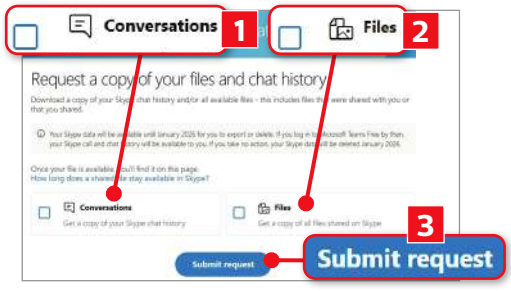
1 Download your Skype chats

If you want to preserve any of the information mentioned above, you'll need to export it before it disappears. You'll able to do this any time between now and the end of the year – Microsoft states that "your Skype data will be available until January 2026 for you to export or delete".

Nonetheless, we'd still recommend doing it sooner rather than later as, once you've transitioned to Teams, it might be easy to forget.

Microsoft has set up a dedicated export page for Skype data at www.snipca.com/54338. Log in using your Skype credentials (which in our case are the email address and password of our Microsoft account), then select whether you want to download your conversations (1 in our screenshot) or shared files 2 – or both – and click 'Submit request' 3.

You may find that some files are no



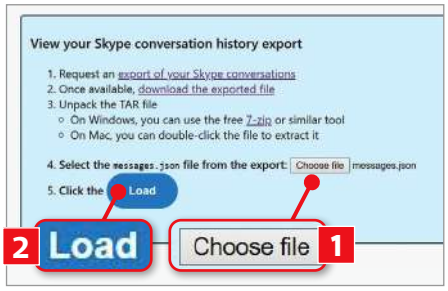
You can export your Skype data until January 2026 by selecting conversations and/or files, then clicking 'Submit request'

longer available, because anything you've shared with other users is stored for just 30 days before being removed from Skype's servers, so don't expect to retrieve anything from before then.

If you refresh the page after clicking 'Submit request', you can monitor the progress, then download the file when it's ready. It will be compressed as a tarball – hence the .tar extension. You may need to use a third-party tool to extract its contents – try the excellent 7-Zip (www.7-zip.org).

Once you've downloaded and extracted your conversations, they can be opened in the Skype 'parser', which is a web page that can extract and organise the contents. Download the parser by clicking the 'here' link below the 'Submit request' button on the page where you made your data request (via the link at the bottom of page 35).

Double-click the 'skype-parser.zip' file in your Downloads folder to extract its contents, then double-click the 'index.html' file it contains. Click the 'Choose file' button (1 in our screenshot below) and navigate to the 'messages.json' file that you extracted from the conversations download. Select it and click Open. Now, back at the parser web page, click Load to open your chats 2.


View your Skype conversation history export
1. Request an export of your Skype conversations
2. Once available, download the exported file
3. Unpack the TAR file
On Windows, you can use the free 7-zip or similar tool
On Mac, you can double-click the file to extract it
4. Select the messages.json file from the export: Choose file messages.json
5. Click the Load
2 Load
Choose file 1

Click 'Choose file' then navigate to and open the 'messages.json' file on your PC

2 Access your old chats in Teams

If you're happy to move from Skype to Teams, you shouldn't need to download your chats because they should be transferred to the new system.

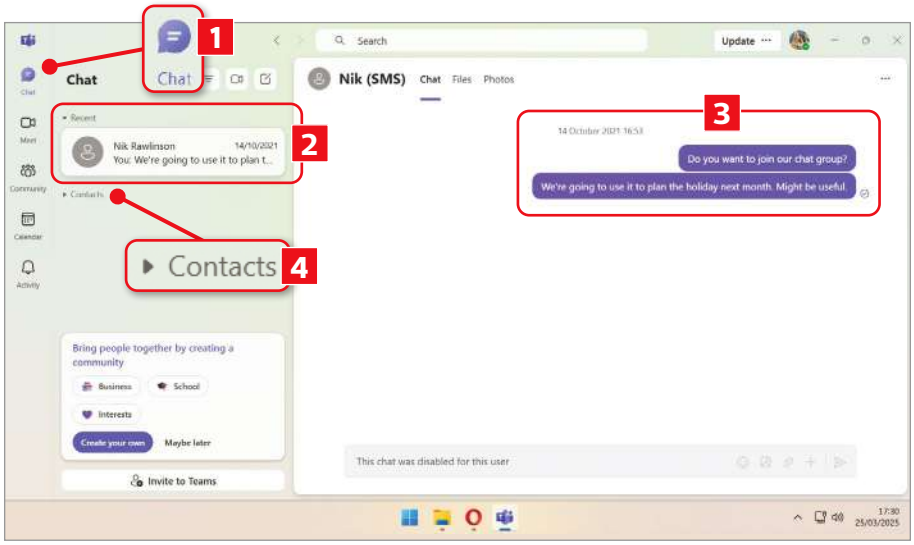
When you first open the program and if you already have both a Teams and Skype account, you'll need to choose which one you want to use within Teams. As you can see from our screenshot right, Teams has recognised both of our accounts automatically. Because we also use Teams in a business context, but have used Skype very little over recent years, we're going to stick with our Teams account by clicking the one marked 'Current profile'.

As soon as Teams logs you in, you should see that your existing content has been transferred. So, to recover (and continue) your text-based conversations, click Chat at the top left (1 in our screenshot above). Your recent discussions will be listed below that 2. Click one and it'll open in the main panel 3.

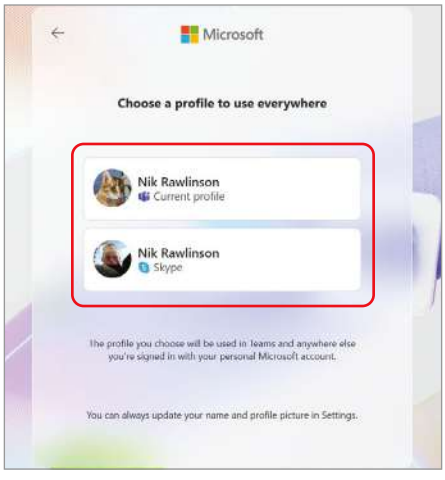
Notice how there's also an entry for Contacts 4 below your chats. Click this header to reveal your contacts, then hover over each one and a profile card will pop up with their details.

As Microsoft also owns the business networking site LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com), you may find that several of these include business profiles.

To begin a chat with anyone in your contacts list, simply click their name in the sidebar and start typing into the text box in the window's main pane.



Click 'Chat' to access your old Skype conversations and Contacts for contact details


Microsoft
Choose a profile to use everywhere
Nik Rawlinson
Current profile
Nik Rawlinson
Skype
The profile you choose will be used in Teams and anywhere else you're signed in with your personal Microsoft account.
You can always update your name and profile picture in Settings.

If you have a profile for both Teams and Skype, select the one you want to use

3 Talk with non-Teams users

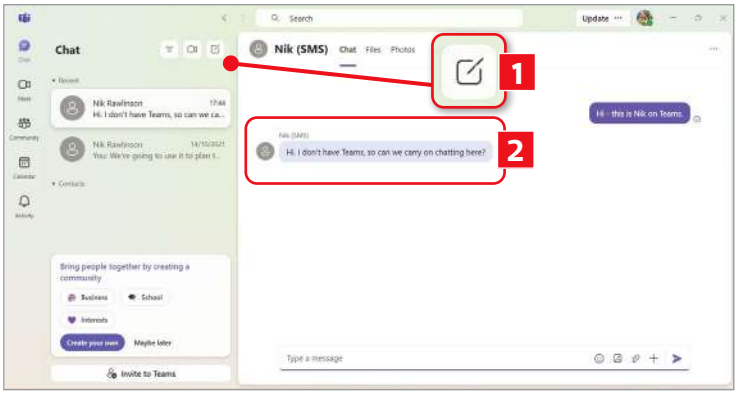
It was always possible to send text messages from Skype to mobile phones, as long as you had money in your account to cover the cost. You can do the same in Teams. To send a text by SMS, click the pencil and paper icon at the top of the second sidebar (1 in our screenshot above right), then type the number of the phone you want to reach in the To box.

How I make internet calls

All my calls go over the internet, and have done for years. I have two lines from Localphone (www.localphone.com) and two from Sipgate (www.sipgate.co.uk), over which I make and receive calls using a dedicated SIP-based desk phone. I use Teams, Zoom and Google Meet for online meetings, but these are usually video rather than purely audio.

Nik Rawlinson

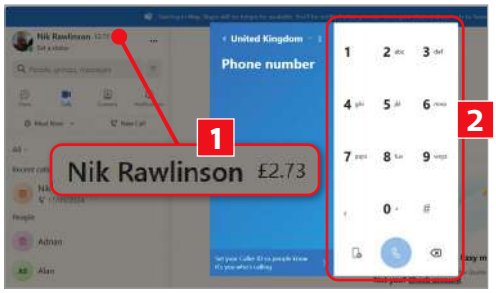
How do you make internet calls?
Please let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk



You can send SMS text messages from within Teams

When you press Enter, Teams will prompt you to enter the name of the contact so it can show this in the conversation pane. Now, type your message into the message box and click the paper-aeroplane icon to send it.

When it comes through on the other person's phone, it will be displayed just like a standard message. They can reply directly if they prefer not to install Teams themselves. Their response will arrive in your Teams conversations view 2 just like it would if it was sent by another Teams user.



The dial pad is still available through the Skype web portal

4 Make phone calls in Teams

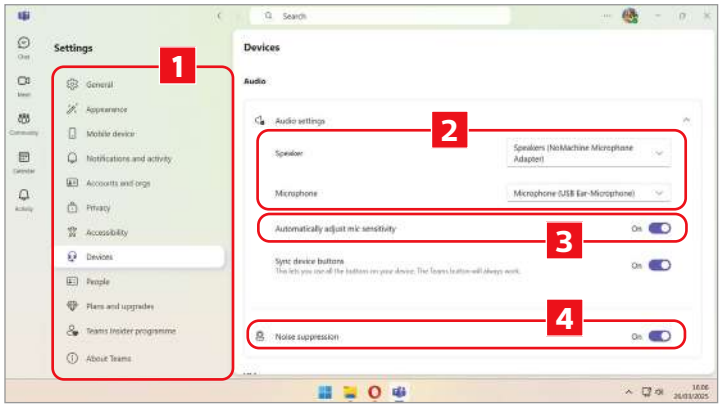
What you may have noticed from our screenshots is that while it's easy to have a text-based chat, there's no button for making phone calls. Microsoft's help pages covering the transition state that the "Skype Dial Pad will be available starting in May to existing paid users from the Skype web portal and within Teams Free" (see www.snipca.com/54347). We'll have to see from May, therefore, how it's implemented in Teams.

In the meantime, you can still make calls through the Skype web portal (at www.skype.com) if you have a credit balance (as we do – albeit for just £2.73, 1 in our screenshot above) by using Skype's dial pad 2, which can still be found there.

If you want to make voice calls through Teams – whether to external contacts if you have credit and access to the dial pad or to other Teams users within the app – first make sure your audio equipment is correctly set up.

If you've plugged in a microphone, but also have a mic built into your computer, and are maybe listening to music through Bluetooth earbuds that have integrated mics for use on a mobile phone, you need to tell your computer (and Teams) which you want to use in this instance.

Click the three dots at the top of the Teams window (to the left of your profile icon), then click Settings. Now click Devices in the second sidebar (1 in our screenshot below left) and check that the dropdown menus for both Speaker and Microphone accurately specify the devices you want to use 2. We recommend leaving 'Automatically adjust mic sensitivity' 3 and 'Noise suppression' 4 switched on to give your computer the best chance of sending a clear signal.



Make sure you've selected the correct audio devices when you make voice calls to other Teams users

Scroll further down and you'll see there are similar settings for video devices. Again, make sure the correct device is selected on the Camera menu if you are using more than one. We would also recommend switching on the option to 'Adjust brightness'.

There are two other options covering video: mirror video and soft focus. Both of these are a matter of preference, although the first can be quite useful if you need to accurately point to items while keeping an eye on yourself in the video window. Just be aware that if your video is mirrored, so will any text visible on screen. This could be a problem if you're making a call as part of a job interview or because you want to demonstrate something.

Keep your landline number

If you still need a landline number then – as a home user – you have two options. You could transfer an existing Skype number to another provider, or you could register a new number with an alternative supplier.

The latter may cost less than you'd expect, with companies like Localphone (www.localphone.com) offering UK-based numbers for 90p a month, plus a one-off 90p setup fee.

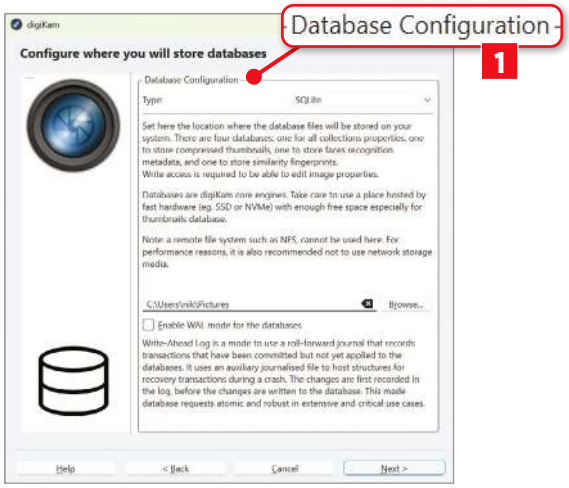
You can select a number from more than 600 area codes – you're not restricted to choosing the code for your local area. So, you could choose a number in Carlisle and use it in Canterbury, or register a line in Margate that you actually use in Manchester.

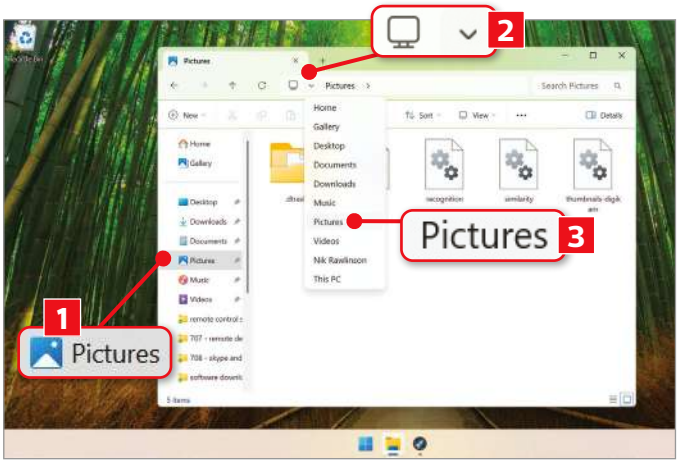
Most internet telephony providers use a technology called SIP to manage and host calls, which is compatible with dedicated SIP phones. These are converters into which you can plug a regular landline phone, or smartphone apps like ZoIPer (www.zoiper.com).

Find faces in photos and put them in groups

What you need: digiKam **Time required:** One hour

If you take a lot of photos of different people – for example, on holidays or at family events – it can take hours to get them all organised. But it doesn't need to. The new version of photo-library software digiKam (8.6.0) has a handy new feature that can automatically recognise faces in your photos, match them to other faces in your library and – in doing so – create a series of albums that automatically groups your pictures by person. We've found it incredibly accurate, even with pictures that were taken several years apart and where subjects are wearing hats. Here, we explain how to use it.

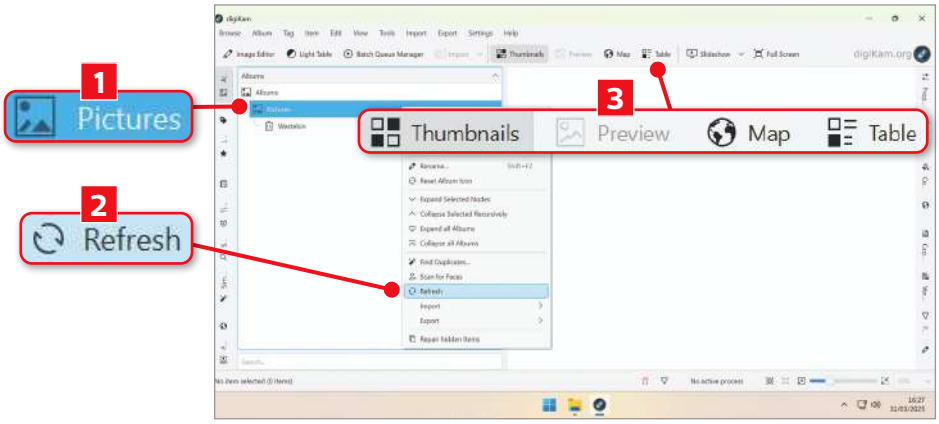


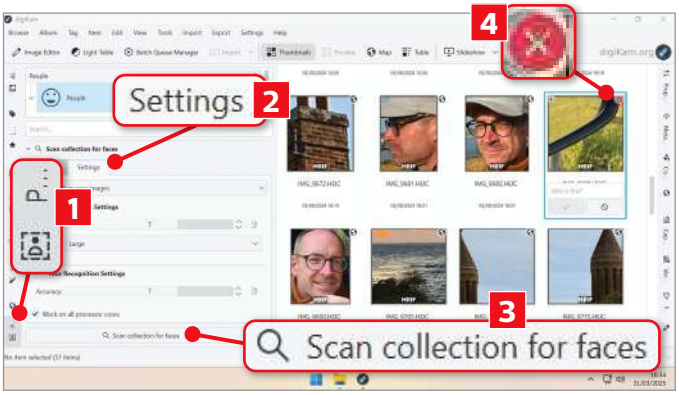


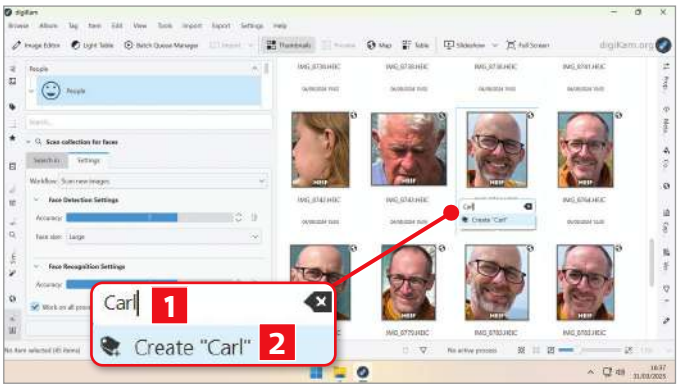
STEP 1 Download digiKam from www.snipca.com/54395 by clicking the '64-bits' link below 'Windows Intel 10 or later'. Double-click the 'digiKam-8.6.0-Qt6-Win64.exe' file in your Downloads folder and, when Windows asks if you'd like to make changes to your system, click Yes. Follow the onscreen installation steps, selecting the default options at each stage. The first time you launch digiKam, follow the setup process. Some questions – for example, about the type of database you want to use 1 – can be quite daunting. Fortunately, you can leave all of the defaults as they are.

STEP 2 As long as you didn't change any default options during setup, digiKam will be set to automatically work with photos stored in your Pictures library. Make sure this includes the images you want to organise by opening File Explorer and clicking Pictures 1 in the sidebar (if this doesn't appear, click the arrow next to the computer icon in the address bar 2 then Pictures 3). Copy and paste your photos into the File Explorer window you've just opened, then return to digiKam.

STEP 3 DigiKam won't immediately detect your new images, so right-click Pictures 1. Now click Refresh 2 in the dropdown menu and it will check for changes and show thumbnails of your photos in the larger pane to the right. If you want to change this view, click one of the buttons on the toolbar (these include Thumbnails, Preview, Map and Table 3). The Map view, for example, can accurately place photos taken by a smartphone on a map. To start organising through facial recognition, click Thumbnails.



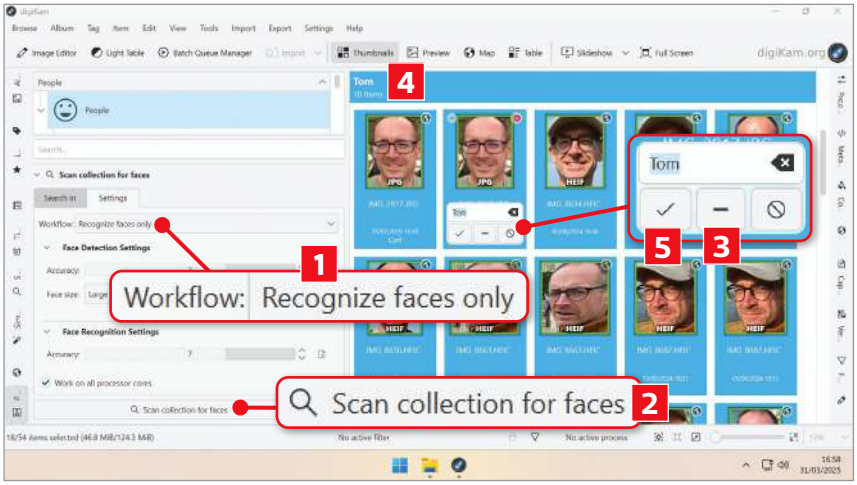


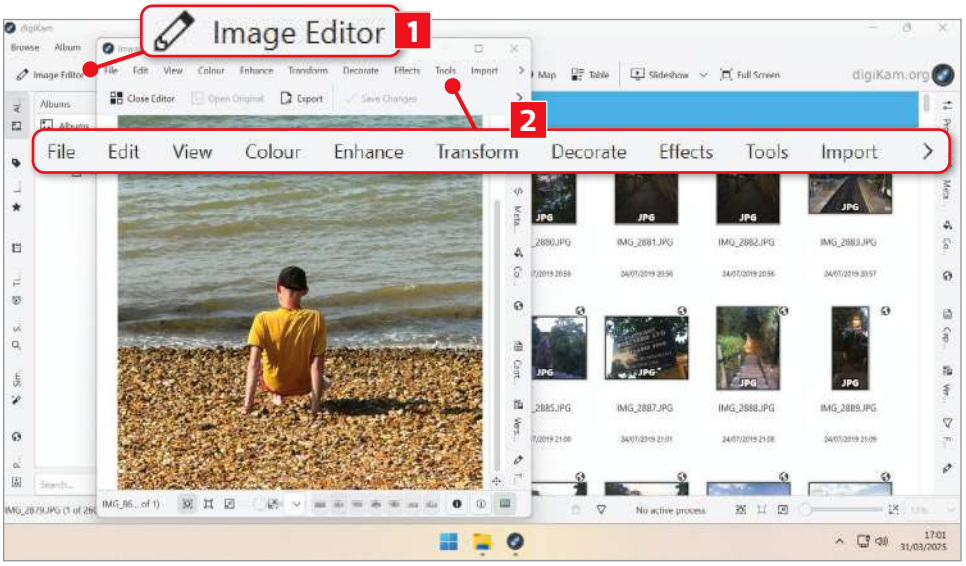


STEP 4 Click 'People' (shortened to P... in our screenshot 1) in the left-hand pane, then switch to the Settings tab 2 and click 'Scan collection for faces' 3. The scanning process can take a while depending on the size of your image library. In our case, 260 photos took about a minute. It recognised 45 'faces' but, as you can see from our screenshot, some results contained no human faces. To remove unwanted shots from your collection, click the 'x' 4 that appears when you hover over a photo.

STEP 5 Of course, digiKam doesn't know your subjects' names, so click a photo and type the name of the person in the box that appears 1, then click the 'Create [name]' line 2 below it. Select another photo. If it's the same person, click the tick below the pre-filled name. If it's not the same person, type their name into the box instead. You'll need to do this with several photos for each person in your library to give digiKam the best chance of automatically recognising faces in the next step. We'd recommend naming three or four photos of each person before proceeding.

STEP 6 Now, click the Workflow dropdown menu and select 'Recognize faces only' 1. Once again, click the 'Scan collection for faces' button 2 and wait for it to process. DigiKam puts the newly recognised faces into groups and puts a green frame around any new ones. Hover over any that it's incorrectly included and click the '–' button 3 to reject that suggestion. To add the remainder to the group of confirmed photos of that person, click the section header 4, then hover over one of the photos and click the tick 5 – all recognised photos will now be confirmed.





STEP 7 DigiKam is more than just an image-management tool – you can also use it to edit your photos. Select one that you want to tweak then click Image Editor 1 to open the editing tools. Now use the options at the top of the Editor window 2 to switch between the different tools. Each of these is a section header that when clicked displays a menu of further editing options.

Readers' Tips

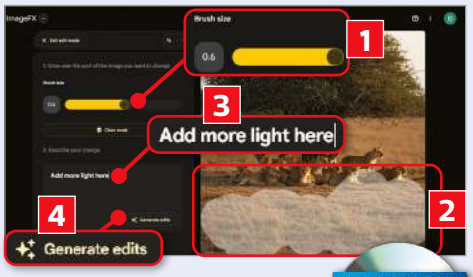
TIP OF THE FORTNIGHT

Move brush to make precise edits in ImageFX

My favourite tool in Issue 706's excellent Cover Feature on AI tools is ImageFX (www.snipca.com/54057). It's the easiest image generator I've ever used, and has some advanced editing options if you know how to use them.

Type your descriptive prompt as usual, then click Generate and select an image you like. Hover over it and the 'Edit image' button should appear bottom left. Click this and you'll be taken to a page where you can change the 'brush size' slider (1 in screenshot). This indicates the size of the brush you can move over the image – like a standard brush tool in a traditional image-editing program.

Now draw the virtual brush over the part of the image you want to edit 2 and type a description of the changes you want on the left 3. All that's left is to click 'Generate edits' 4 – or 'Clear mask' to undo any edits.



Philip Wilkinson

Philip wins a copy of our 2024 Back Issue CD **Buy it from us at www.snipca.com/53433**

SOFTWARE

Allow screenshots of password manager

I prefer passphrases to passwords, so was interested that KeePassXC – my password manager of choice – now lets you mix upper- and lower-case letters (see Issue 707, page 11). Somehow, mostly thanks to *Computeractive*, I've become the tech helper to my extended family, and I often send them screenshots of software settings they should activate. I wanted to do this for the KeePassXC tip, but none of my screenshot programs would work. It was annoying at first, but then I realised it must be for security reasons.

But then I started wondering how *Computeractive* had managed to publish a screenshot. I assumed KeePassXC lets you do it somehow, and I was right. Click 'View' at the top, then tick Allow Screen Capture. I then took screenshots just as I would in any other program.

Lynne Maddison

SOFTWARE

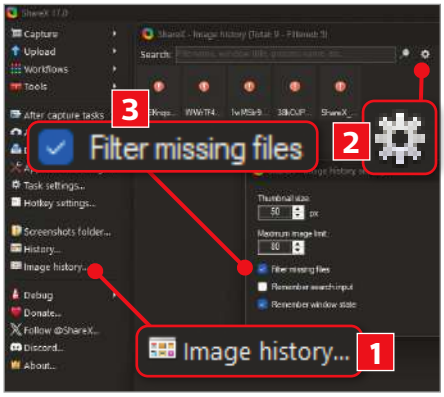
Remove deleted files from ShareX's history

Following recent tips in *Computeractive*, ShareX (https://getsharex.com) is now my favourite program for taking screenshots. How they can offer so many tools and settings for free is just incredible.

One trick I've just discovered is how to make sure files you've deleted from your computer no longer show up in ShareX's image history. This makes sense because once you've discarded an image you presumably don't need it anymore – and so what's the point of keeping it in ShareX's history? It would only clutter up your screen.

To do this, click 'Image history' on the left (1 in screenshot above right) then the Settings cog 2. Now tick 'Filter missing files' 3. You don't need to click an OK button to confirm.

Ian Maguire



OFFICE

Send emails to groups in Outlook without errors

I'm using Outlook in Microsoft 365, and when I try to send an email to a group I see the error message 'Couldn't send this message' (see screenshot above right) – though surprisingly I don't get it when the group name is only in the BCC field. Outlook saves the unsent group

Why I stopped using...

Amazon Kindle

When I found out that Amazon was going to stop users moving Kindle ebooks via USB (Issue 705, page 9), I tried to back up my books before the deadline.

However, I had a problem almost straight away. I was reading my books on a tablet using the Kindle app because I didn't want two devices and Amazon wouldn't let me back them up because I didn't have a registered Kindle device. I also learned that you don't actually own your ebooks, and that Amazon has the right to update or even remove a book from your library.

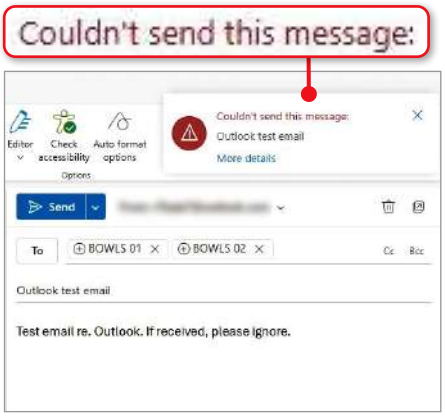
And what I use instead...

So I've now bought the **Kobo Clara Colour** e-reader (£130 from www.snipca.com/54348, pictured)

to avoid any further problems and I have backed up my downloaded books to it. I like that you can set a 'bed time' so when you're reading at night the back light is yellow rather than bright white.

Barry Miller

Tell us why you stopped using a website, app or program: letters@computeractive.co.uk



email as a draft. No matter how often I try to send this email I get the same error message.

After much trial and error I've found how to get the email sent. I have to expand the 'To' field to the individual email addresses. I then need to click the plus (+) sign to the left of each group name and the individual email addresses appear. I can then send the email.

However, you can't expand the group(s) after the error message with the email saved as a draft because the plus sign to the left of the group name(s) in the 'To' field disappears. My solution is to open the saved draft in full screen by double-clicking it, then clicking the 'Open in new window' icon. Now remove all the group names in the 'To' field, then re-type the group names in the same box. This makes the plus sign(s) re-appear.

Now click the plus sign by all group names and the individual email addresses appear. The email can then be sent. It's a long-winded way of sending emails to groups, but there doesn't seem to be a simpler way.

Richard Bale

EMAIL

Create an alias to beat blacklist

In Issue 705 (page 67) Cliff Brambleton asked for your help because the National Trust's email provider Blackbaud had blacklisted his email provider Mail.com. Cliff didn't want to change his email provider, but he might be able to get around the problem by setting up an email alias with AdGuard (www.snipca.com/54241, see screenshot right) and give this new address to the National Trust. Once it's set up, he'd never notice the difference. He could follow your instructions for doing this in Issue 702's Workshop (page 38).

Tim Mallinson

Reader recommends...

OnePlus Pad 2

£449 from www.snipca.com/53247

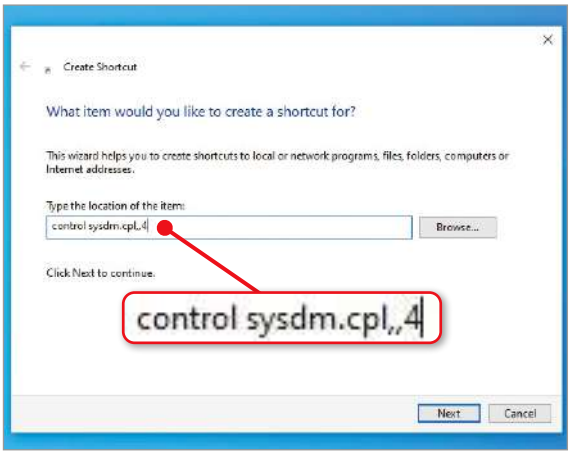
In recent years, I've become hooked on simulation games on my PC. I was looking for a more portable device that would let me play these games while lounging on the sofa, and was interested in the OnePlus Pad 2 following your review (Issue 701, page 24), where you said it was especially impressive when handling games.

I regularly play four games on it: Infinite Flight, Train Station 2, Port City: Ship Tycoon and Designer City 2. They all play smoothly thanks to the Pad 2's 144Hz refresh rate. It's also fast and the battery life is incredible. Your review said it could last over 18 hours on a single charge. I can't confirm that (my wife wouldn't let me play it for that long continuously), but I only need to charge it every couple of days. It certainly lasts longer than my old Samsung Galaxy Tab S7 ever did.

It's turned out to be one of my best ever tech purchases. I've even used it to take some good-quality photos, which surprised me.

Dean Lovell

Want to recommend hardware or software to fellow readers?
Email letters@computeractive.co.uk


Create Shortcut
What item would you like to create a shortcut for?
This wizard helps you to create shortcuts to local or network programs, files, folders, computers or Internet addresses.
Type the location of the item:
control sysdm.cpl,,4
Browse...
Click Next to continue.
control sysdm.cpl,,4
Next
Cancel

WINDOWS

Create desktop shortcut for System Restore

System Restore can be a lifesaver when your computer goes belly up, but you have to burrow into Windows' innards to find it. Here's how to place a one-click shortcut to System Restore on your desktop. Right-click an empty space and select New, then Shortcut. In the 'Type the location of the item' box type control sysdm.cpl,,4 (1 in our screenshot left). Click Next, then give it a, suitable name and click Finish. Your shortcut will now appear on your desktop 2.

Carl Hughes

HARDWARE

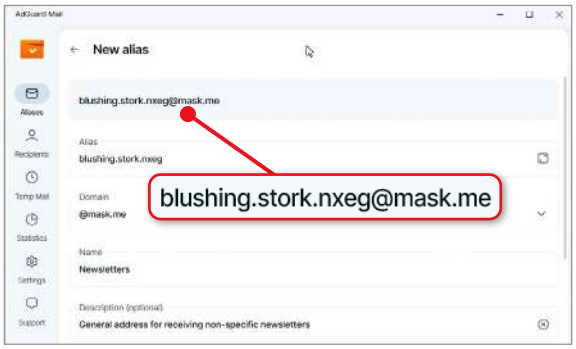
Press power button at the far right to turn on your laptop

I've enjoyed reading *Computeractive* over the past 25 years, but I've never been able to help anyone – until now!

In Issue 704's Problems Solved (page 66) Terry Nicholson wrote that his power button works only intermittently on his Asus Vivobook Pro 14.

I've had the same problem on my Vivobook Pro 14. I've found that the only way to power up the laptop is to very gently press the power button on its far-right edge. Nothing will happen if you press in the centre. I've been using this method for a year or more and it works every time.

Ian Hickson



Browser Tips

CHROME

Add a Downloads button to the toolbar

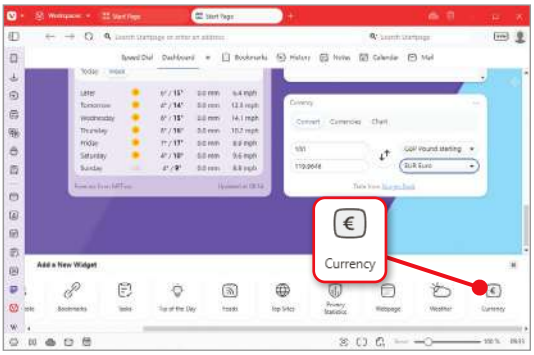
Chrome used to show your downloads in a bar across the bottom of the browser, which made them easy to open when ready. Google then relocated downloads to a 'download bubble' in the top-right toolbar.

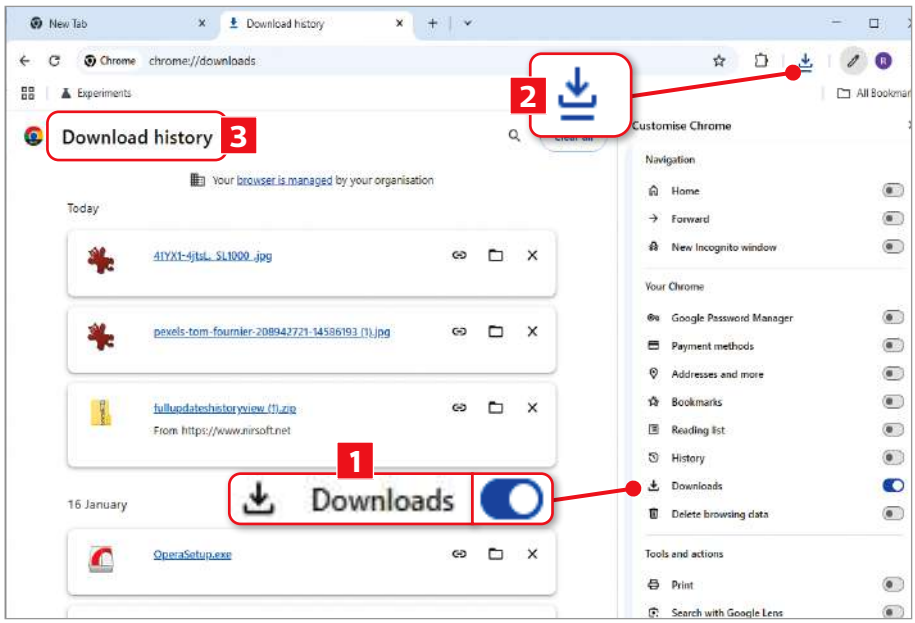
This bubble is more convenient to access and prevents downloads from obscuring the web page you're viewing. However, it only appears when you start downloading a file, then vanishes when you restart the browser. To retrieve the file after restarting, you need to press Ctrl+J to open Chrome's 'Download history' and open it from there.

To solve this problem, Chrome 135 (released in early April) lets you pin a permanent Downloads button to your toolbar. This means you can access your downloads whenever you want – at the click of a button.

To add this feature to the browser, click the Customise Chrome button in the bottom-right corner of a New Tab page. In the side panel that opens, select Toolbar and switch on the Downloads option in the Your Chrome section (1 in our screenshot below).

A Downloads button will now appear on the browser's toolbar 2, which you can click to open your 'Download history' 3 after the bubble disappears. To remove the button, right-click it and choose Unpin.





VIVALDI

Discover the new features in version 7.2

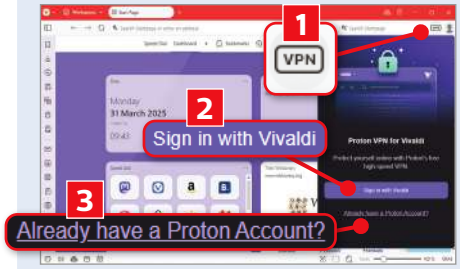
Vivaldi 7.2, released in March, brings a host of new features and improvements to the ever-innovative browser. Most notably, Vivaldi has integrated the excellent VPN Proton VPN, to encrypt your browsing data and keep you anonymous online.

Sign up for a free account to automatically connect to a secure server, or pay a subscription to choose from thousands of servers and unlock additional options. See our Workshop below to find out how to use Proton VPN in Vivaldi.

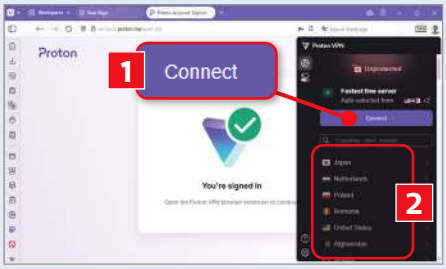
Vivaldi 7.2 updates the address bar to make it "smarter and faster". It now suggests search queries and web pages as soon as you start typing into the bar, and uses your bookmarks and search and browsing histories to ensure the suggestions are relevant. Under the bonnet, Vivaldi has optimised its 'connection handling' to load pages faster.

The browser's Dashboard, introduced in version 7, continues to expand with the addition of a new Currency widget.

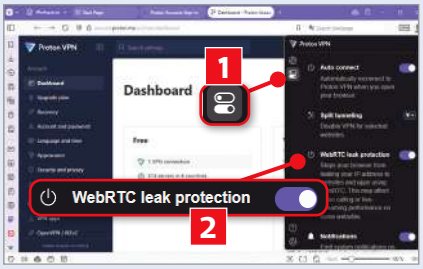
WORKSHOP Browse privately in Vivaldi with Proton VPN



1 To get started with Proton VPN in Vivaldi, click the new VPN button in the browser's top-right corner 1. Choose 'Sign in with Vivaldi' 2 to register using your Vivaldi account or 'Already have a Proton Account?' 3 to link Proton with Vivaldi.



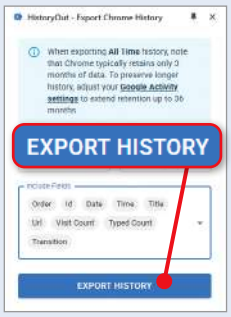
2 Once you've signed into Proton, click the VPN button again. Click 'Connect' 1 and Proton will connect you to the fastest available free server – this is usually in the Netherlands. To choose a server from the list 2, you need a paid-for Proton subscription.



3 Click the Features (sliders) button 1 to tweak Proton VPN's settings. Although some options require a subscription, you can set Vivaldi to automatically connect to Proton VPN and enable 'WebRTC leak protection' 2 to boost your online privacy.

BEST EXTENSION FOR... Saving your browsing history

HistoryOut
Chromium
www.snipca.com/54377
By default, Chrome deletes your browsing history after three months – though you can extend this to 36 months in your Google account settings. This protects your privacy and frees up storage, but it also means losing access to useful pages you never bookmarked.



HistoryOut lets you export your browsing history as a CSV spreadsheet or HTML or JSON file, giving you a permanent record of all sites you've visited. Just specify the export format and time range, and click Export History (see screenshot). Usefully, you can include additional information in the history file, such as the dates and times you visited each page, the number of times you did so and even how you accessed each page – whether through a search engine or by typing its URL in your address bar.

If you don't like that, try...

History Export
Firefox
www.snipca.com/54405
This add-on provides a 'quick and dirty' way to export your browsing history from Firefox, but only in JSON format.

This lets you instantly convert sums of money to and from 38 currencies, and view current exchange rates. To add the widget to your Dashboard, click the 'Add a Widget' button and select Currency (see screenshot above left).

Other changes include the ability to set 'priority' keyboard shortcuts, which override the custom shortcuts used by websites, and a new Share Vivaldi button in the Help menu. This lets you invite your friends to try Vivaldi, so they can also enjoy all the browser's benefits.

EDGE

Turn off 'trending searches' in the address bar

Rather than introduce any useful features in Edge 135 (released in April), Microsoft has instead added an annoying one. When you click the browser's address bar while you're on a New Tab page, Edge will now show 'trending searches' from Bing in a dropdown menu.

These appear before you start typing a search query or web address, even when Bing isn't your default search engine. Though you may find it interesting to see what other people are searching for, we think you're more likely to regard these 'trending searches' as pointless clutter.

Thankfully, it's possible to turn off this new feature, though the option is hidden. Click Edge's three-dot menu button and choose Settings, then 'Privacy, search and services'. Scroll down to the 'Search and connected experiences' section and select 'Address bar and search'.

Now click 'Search suggestions and filters' and switch off the option 'Show me trending searches from Microsoft Bing' (1 in our screenshot below left).

You can also disable the setting 'Show me search and site suggestions using my typed characters'. This will stop Edge sharing details of everything you type with Bing, and limit its suggestions to web pages from your History and Favourites.

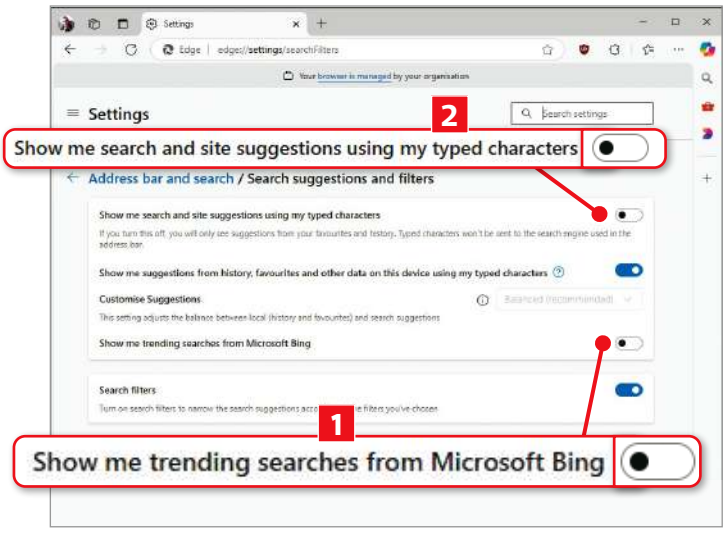
OPERA

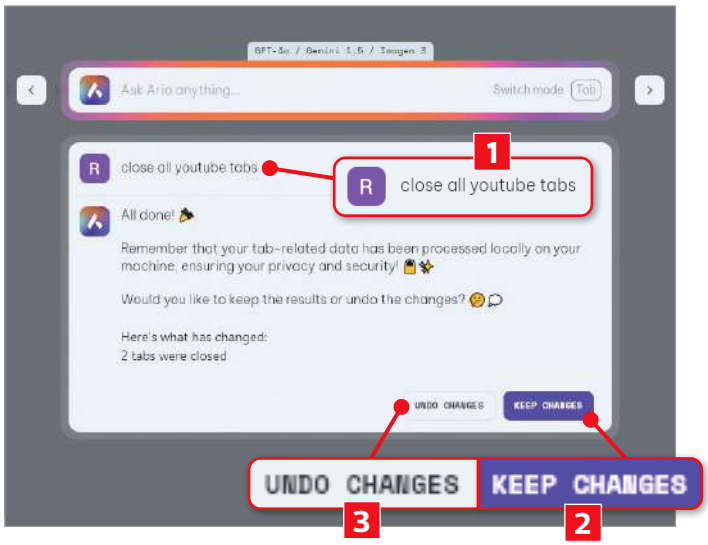
Manage your browser tabs using AI

Opera has updated its AI assistant Aria to go beyond answering questions and generating content, and control the browser itself. You can now ask the chatbot to close, group, pin and perform other actions to your tabs.

Press Ctrl+/ (forward slash) to open Aria's command-line message box, and type a tab-related command such as pin the current tab, group all Amazon tabs or close all YouTube tabs (1 in our screenshot below). The AI assistant will respond accordingly, perform the requested action and confirm what's changed.

Click 'Keep changes' 2 to accept the result and continue browsing, or 'Undo changes' 3 to make Aria reverse the action. When you have more than five tabs open, you can also access AI commands by right-clicking a tab and choosing AI Tab Management.


Settings
Show me search and site suggestions using my typed characters
2
Address bar and search / Search suggestions and filters
Show me trending searches from Microsoft Bing
1



Phone and Tablet Tips

ANDROID & iOS

Chat with Meta AI in WhatsApp

Meta has added its AI assistant to WhatsApp in the UK and EU, almost a year after it launched the feature in the US. You may already have received a welcome message from Meta AI in your Chats list, and have a new Meta AI button – which resembles a blue-and-pink circle – in the bottom-right corner of the app.

Meta AI
with Llama 3.2
Today
Meta AI is an optional service from Meta that uses AI models to provide responses. Meta AI can only read messages people share with it. Meta can't read any other messages in your personal chats, as your personal messages remain end-to-end encrypted. Don't share information, including sensitive topics, about others or yourself that you don't want the AI to retain and use. Meta shares information with select partners so Meta AI can offer relevant responses.
Your interactions with AIs won't be used to improve AI at Meta. Learn more about Meta's Privacy Policy and your rights. Messages are generated by AI. Some may be inaccurate or inappropriate.
Your use of WhatsApp is covered by WhatsApp's Privacy Policy. By using Meta AI, you agree to Meta's AI terms. Review terms and policies
How do I remove Meta AI? 15:31
Meta AI aims to be a helpful assistant and is in the search bar to assist with your questions. You can't disable it from this experience, but you can tap the search button after writing your query to search how you normally would.
Message

Although the message says 'Meta AI is an optional service', it's currently impossible to remove the feature from WhatsApp. Coupled with the placement of its button directly above the 'New chat' button, where it's easy to tap accidentally, it's unsurprising that many WhatsApp users have complained about Meta AI being foisted on them.

To try the new feature, either reply to the welcome message or tap Meta AI's circular button. You can then talk to the chatbot, which is powered by the Llama 3.2 AI model, as if you were chatting to a real person, though it won't tell you how to remove it (see screenshot left). Unlike other AI tools, you can't upload files for Meta AI to analyse, ask it to generate images or interact with it verbally using voice mode.

Meta AI is also now integrated with the company's Messenger app. Here it has a separate tab from the main Chats list, so is a little easier to ignore, though again it can't be hidden or removed.

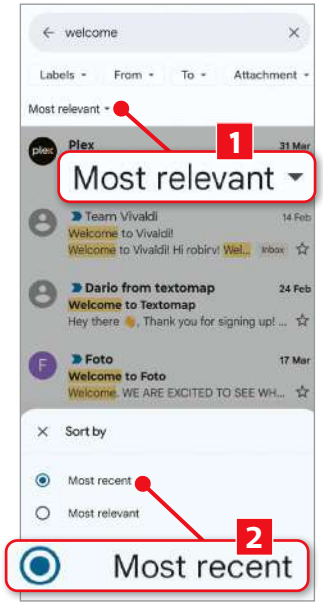
We think AI features should be optional rather than forced on users, so hopefully Meta will respond to criticism by adding a setting that disables the feature.

ANDROID & iOS

Search for Gmail messages by relevance

When you search your email inbox for a specific message, the results are presented chronologically. This can entail a lot of scrolling or swiping until you reach the date you received the message – especially if it was a while ago.

To make things easier, Google has updated its Gmail app to present its search results by relevance. Instead of just showing emails in chronological order based on the keywords you enter, Gmail results now use AI to factor in elements such as which messages you open most often and your most frequent contacts, as well as 'recency'.



When you search your Gmail inbox, the results are now shown as 'Most relevant' by default. Matching keywords in the subject lines and bodies of emails are still highlighted in yellow, as before.

If you'd prefer to see results in the traditional chronological order, tap 'Most relevant' in the 'Sort by' menu (1 in our screenshot left) and choose 'Most recent' instead 2. The new 'Most relevant' feature is also available in the web version of Gmail.

BEST NEW APPS What you should install this fortnight

Ente Photos

Free*

Android www.snipca.com/54381
iOS www.snipca.com/54382

Ente Photos creates private backups of your pictures and videos, and protects them using end-to-end encryption. You can share albums privately and use the AI-powered search to find photos by describing their subjects. Ente's free plan gives you a generous 10GB of online storage, with 50GB available for just £2.49 a month.

FakeOut

Free

Android www.snipca.com/54386

This app helps you identify fake news stories and AI-generated pictures. Enter a keyword or upload a screenshot, and FakeOut will find relevant online articles and tell you whether their content is true or false. It uses respected fact-checking sources such as Snopes and Full Fact, and lists recent fact checks for specific countries.

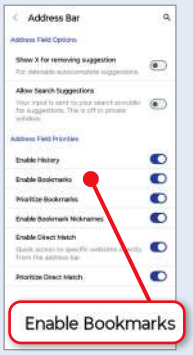
FakeOut
Detect Fake News & AI Images
tariff
False
AI False
"Tariffs are a tax hike on foreign countries"
Source: Karoline Leavitt
Mixture
AI Partially True
The government of Canada charges 250% tariffs on U.S. dairy products imported into Canada.
False
AI False
"[W]e were richest, the richest, relatively, from, think of this, from 1870 to 1913 ... because we c...
Source: Donald Trump

Vivaldi

Free

Android www.snipca.com/54379
iOS www.snipca.com/54380

Vivaldi has updated its mobile browser in line with its new desktop version (see page 42). You can now personalise the address bar to show suggestions from your Bookmarks and History; hide the navigation bar when scrolling web pages in the Android app; and set different zoom levels for specific sites in the iOS app.



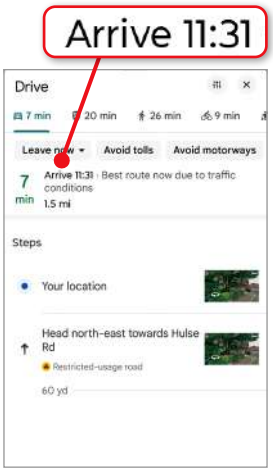
*Contains in-app purchases

ANDROID & iOS

View your estimated arrival time in Google Maps

Google Maps has updated its mobile app with the useful ability to see your estimated time of arrival (ETA) at a destination before you start travelling there. Previously, the app only provided this information after you tapped Start to begin navigation.

To view your ETA, search for a destination, tap Directions and choose between Drive, Walk or Cycle. In the pop-up panel that shows the estimated journey duration and distance, you'll now see an 'Arrive' time (see screenshot left).



This may also include relevant details such as whether the traffic is heavy, or if the route includes a hill or steps. When you add stops to the route, your 'Arrive' time will adjust accordingly.

iOS

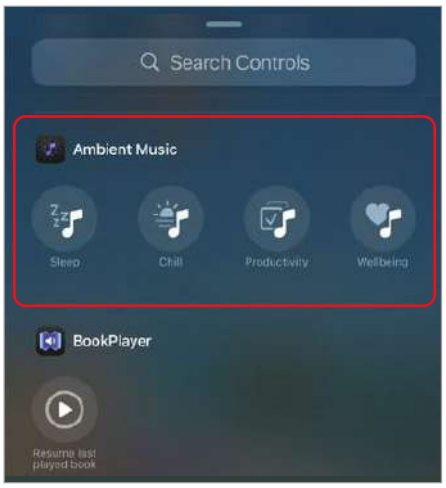
Try the new features in iOS 18.4

On 31 March (slightly earlier than expected), Apple released iOS and iPadOS 18.4, its latest software update for iPhones and iPads. As with other recent updates, several changes relate to its AI system, Apple Intelligence, which is only compatible with newer devices – see the bottom of this page (www.snipca.com/54388) for the full list.

These include the new Priority Notifications feature, which uses Apple Intelligence to identify the most important notifications from iOS apps, and shows them at the top of your lock screen. Other additions, which are available to all iOS and iPadOS users, are more minor, but could still prove useful.

For example, the Control Centre, which you access by swiping down from the top-right corner of your screen, has a new Ambient Music option. This lets you listen to soothing tunes when you want to concentrate on something or just relax. Choose from Sleep, Chill, Productivity or Wellbeing (see screenshot right), and select one of their playlists – you don't need an Apple Music or other streaming subscription.

Apple has added seven new emoji to the iOS/iPadOS keyboard, including fingerprint, shovel, root vegetable and – best of all – 'face with bags under the eyes' (pictured), for when you're feeling weary. Additionally, the Photos app has been updated to let you quickly see pictures that have been shared with you or that haven't been added to an album.



BEST APPS FOR... Blocking spam messages

AdGuard Mail & Temp Mail

Free
Android www.snipca.com/53405
iOS www.snipca.com/53406
AdGuard's brilliant new app provides two ways to beat spam. You can use its aliases feature to avoid revealing your real email address when you register with websites, and a temporary mail address to stop unwanted messages reaching your real inbox. The app's Statistics screen tells you how much spam it's blocked.
Best For Faking your email address

Cleanfox

Free
Android www.snipca.com/54396
iOS www.snipca.com/54397
Cleanfox scans your inbox for newsletters, marketing emails and spam, and lets you delete them and unsubscribe from their mailing lists with a single tap. Its 'Cards' view helpfully tells you how many messages you've received and opened from specific senders. It's free to use but collects anonymous data from your shopping transactions.
Best For Unsubscribing from junk email

Trend Micro ScamCheck

Free*
Android www.snipca.com/54398
iOS www.snipca.com/54399
This powerful security app identifies and blocks spam and scam text messages using AI. Set it as your default messaging app to filter unwanted texts before they reach your inbox, and block messages containing specific keywords. ScamCheck can also block spam phone calls and detect deepfakes. It costs £1.99 a month after a 30-day free trial.
Best For Blocking spam text messages

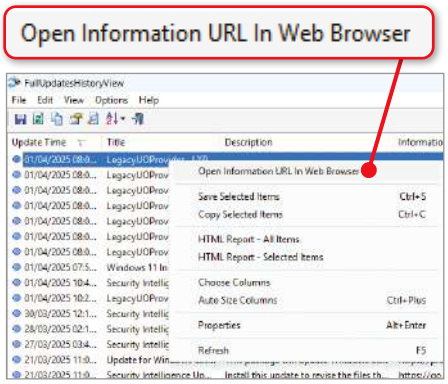
*Contains in-app purchases

WINDOWS 10 & 11

Get quick links to Windows update information

As we explained in Issue 707 (page 19), FullUpdatesHistoryView is a new tool from NirSoft that shows all the updates ever installed on your PC. One hidden option is to right-click an update in the list then select 'Open Information URL In Web Browser' (see screenshot below). This takes you to the official page for the update (usually on Microsoft's site) providing details to help you understand what it contains.

To download FullUpdatesHistoryView visit www.snipca.com/54361 then click the link at the bottom. It triggers a Windows SmartScreen warning but it's completely safe to use, so click 'More info' then 'Run anyway'.



WINDOWS 10 & 11

Search your PC using PowerToys' replacement for Run

The latest version of PowerToys (0.90) introduces Command Palette (CmdPal) – Microsoft's long-term replacement for the Windows Run command (which you open by pressing Windows key+R).

First, click Command Palette on the left (1 in our screenshot) and make sure the 'Enable Command Palette' slider is on 2. The shortcut for launching it is Windows key+Alt+Space. Press it and you'll see all the commands you can perform in the tool, starting with searching installed apps at the top 3.

Scroll down to see all the tasks you can perform, including launching traditional Run commands (listed at www.snipca.com/54412), searching files and the web (in your default search engine), opening the registry and more. It has a clean, modern design and in our tests worked smoothly.

To see a link for the 0.90 update, open the General section of PowerToys. If you've yet to install PowerToys, do so from www.snipca.com/54406.

WINDOWS 11

Move pinned apps by right-clicking

You can now move pinned apps in your Start menu by right-clicking them and selecting one of three options: 'Move to front', 'Move left' and 'Move right' (1 in our screenshot below). The left and right options shuffle the apps one position in that direction, while moving an app to the front repositions it at the top left – as we've done with the Settings app 2.

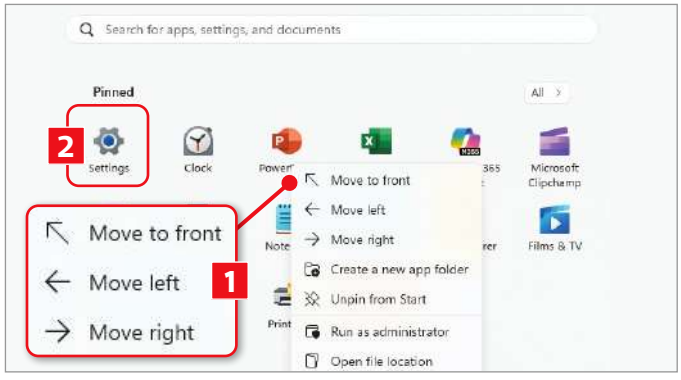
WINDOWS 11 INSIDER

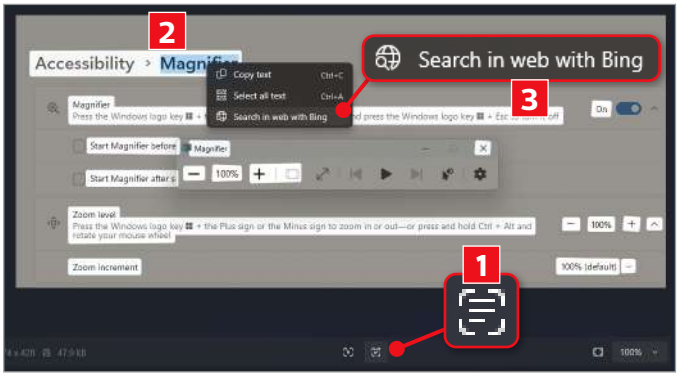
Search online from Photos app using OCR

Windows Insiders can now use optical character recognition (OCR) in the Photos app to search the web for words in images. Open an image then click 'Scan text' at the bottom (1 in our screenshot below right). Now click to highlight a word 2, then right-click it and select 'Search in web with Bing' 3 (there's no option to choose a different search engine).

It's available in version 2025.11030.20006.0 (or later) of the Photos app, which you may need to install from the Microsoft Store. If automatic updates are switched on, you'll already have the update. To switch them on, open the Store, then click your top-right profile followed by Settings, then turn on 'App updates' at the top.

To check your version of Photos, click the cog icon at the top and scroll down to About. You can see what else is new in the app at www.snipca.com/54413.

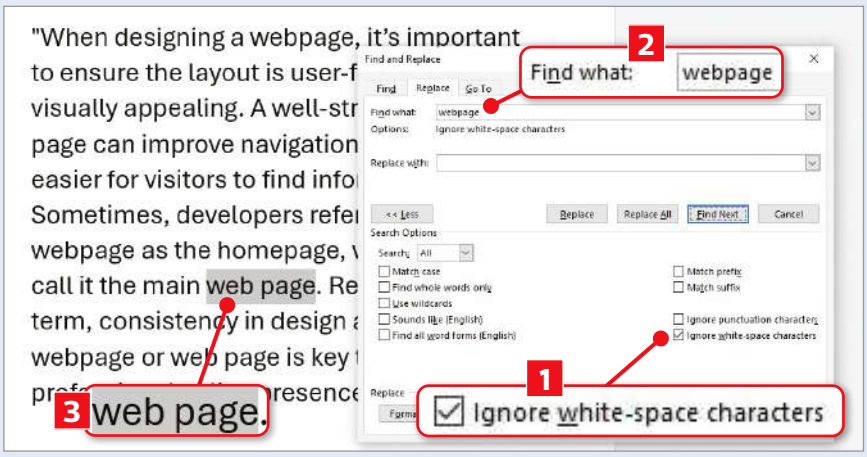


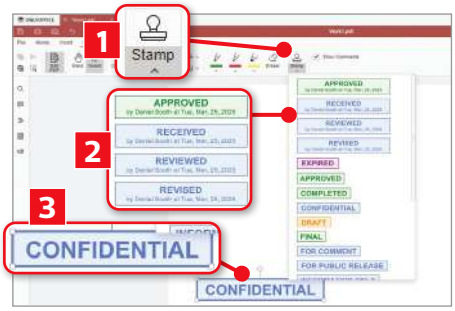


MICROSOFT WORD

Ignore white-space characters in 'Find and Replace'

You can ignore white-space characters when using 'Find and Replace' in Word. This helps you find words which are spelt both with a space and without, such as 'webpage' and 'web page', or 'filename' and 'file name'. Press Ctrl+H to open the 'Find and Replace' box, then click the 'More>>' button and tick 'Ignore white-space characters' (1 in our screenshot). Now type the word you're looking for *without* a space (for example, webpage 2) and click Find Next. Word will find all examples of the word with spaces 3, as well as without.





ONLYOFFICE

Add 'Confidential' and 'Approved' stamps to your PDFs

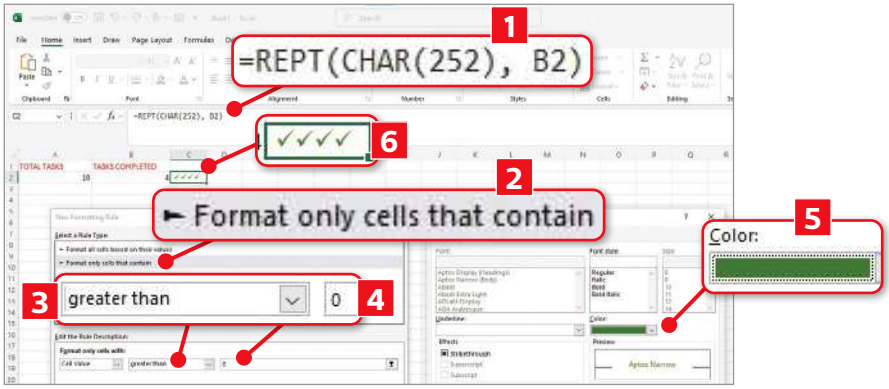
Version 8.3 of OnlyOffice, released in February, lets you add stamps to your PDFs to mark them as confidential, approved, received and more. Insert a PDF into the PDF Editor then click Comment at the top followed by the Stamp dropdown menu (1 in our screenshot above). Now pick the stamp you want. The first four options include the PDF's author (ie, you) and the date 2. You can move the stamp anywhere on the PDF 3, then resize it by dragging the corner squares.

MICROSOFT EXCEL

Add green 'progress' ticks to your spreadsheets

You can add ticks to your spreadsheet to illustrate progress in a task or correct answers to a question – or anything else you think is appropriate.

First, type the number of tasks/questions in a cell, then another number for how many tasks have been completed/questions answered correctly. Now click the cell you want to contain the ticks, followed by the Home tab at the top, then select Wingdings in the Font dropdown menu. Staying in that cell, type =REPT(CHAR(252), XX), where XX is the cell containing the names of completed tasks/questions answered (B2 in our example – see 1 in our screenshot above). That number of ticks should now appear.

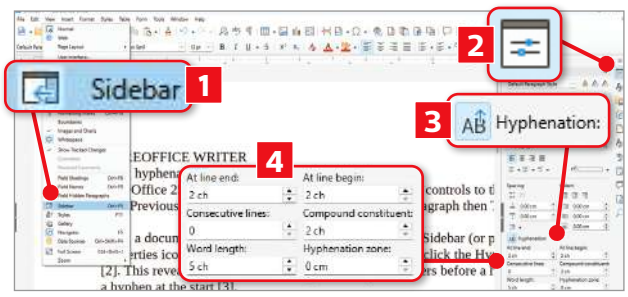


Keep that cell selected then click Home followed by the Conditional Formatting dropdown menu in the Styles section, then New Rule. Click 'Format only cells that contain' 2, select 'greater than' 3 in the dropdown menu below, and set the value to 0 4. Now click Format, then choose a colour from the dropdown menu (green for example 5). Click OK twice, and the ticks will change to the colour you picked 6.

LIBREOFFICE WRITER

Open hyphenation options in document sidebar

LibreOffice 25.2, released in February, adds hyphenation controls to the sidebar's Properties section. Previously, you had to click Format followed by Paragraph, then Text Flow (this still works). Open a document then click View at the top followed by Sidebar (1 in our screenshot below left) – or press Ctrl+F5. Now click the Properties icon 2 – or press Alt+1 – then click the Hyphenation icon at the bottom 3. This reveals six options including how many characters before a hyphen at the end of line and after a hyphen at the start 4.



In The Club

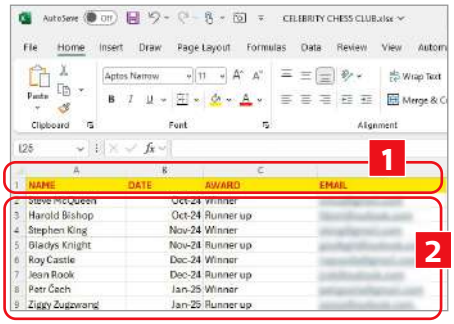
Run a club or society? Here's how your tech can make it easier

Send club certificates using Mail Merge

One of the most useful Office tools for running a club is Mail Merge, which lets you send personalised letters and emails in bulk. You can also use it to send certificates to multiple club members, adding their names, date and award information. Here's how to do this using Microsoft Excel and Word, before sending them via Outlook.

Add data in Excel and choose a certificate

First, you need to compile the relevant data in an Excel spreadsheet. Add appropriate column headings at the top – in our example we've included Name, Date, Award and Email (1 in our screenshot below). These are the placeholders that will appear on your certificate. Now, in each column, fill in the information that you want to appear in each placeholder – ie, specific names, dates, award info and email addresses 2. Save your file when done, then close it.

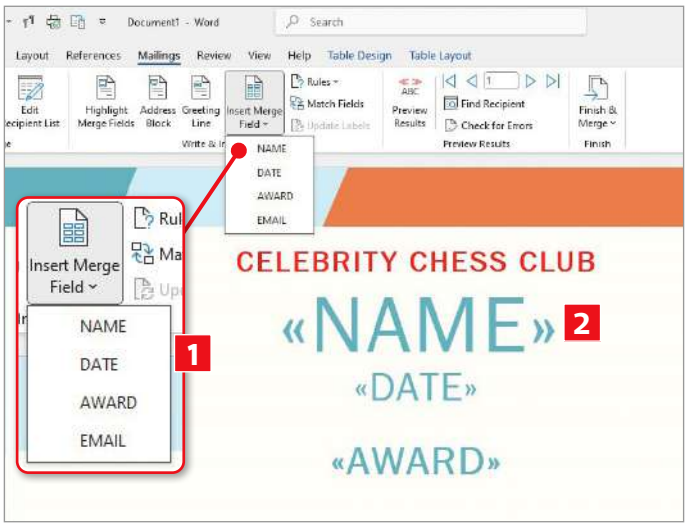


Add your club members' certificate details into your spreadsheet

Now design a certificate in Word or choose a suitable template. We decided to use a template by opening Word, clicking 'More templates' at the top right and searching for 'certificates'. Once you've chosen one, make any design changes you want.

Select your recipients and check for errors

Make sure Outlook is open, then open your certificate in Word and click Mailings at the top, followed by Select Recipients then 'Use an Existing List'.



Select a column heading and it will appear on your certificate inside chevrons

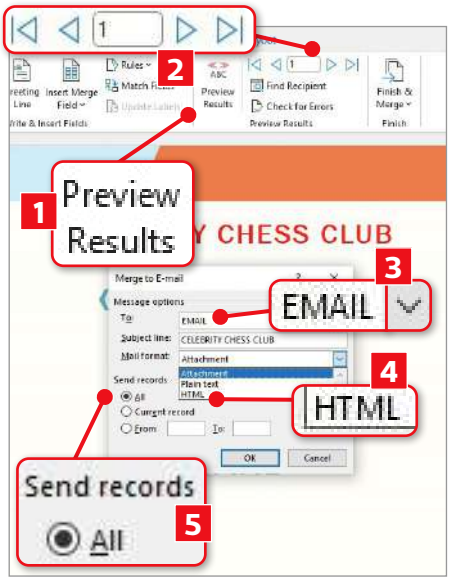
Navigate to your Excel file and open it, then within the certificate click where you want to place the first column heading from your spreadsheet. Click Mailings at the top, then Insert Merge Field and you'll see those headings listed in a dropdown menu (1 in our screenshot above). Click the one you want and it will appear on your certificate, flanked by chevrons (<<,>>) 2.

Next, keeping the Mailings tab open, click Preview Results (1 in our screenshot right) and the column headings on your certificate will change to the first row of data below them in your spreadsheet (for example, name, date etc). To see more rows click the arrows to the right of Preview Results 2, or type the number that corresponds to a specific row on your spreadsheet. You can also click Find Recipient and search for any data in the spreadsheet (not just the person's name).

It's worth clicking 'Check for Errors' to find mistakes such as empty cells and headers that don't match the placeholders. Choose the 'Simulate the merge and report errors' option, which finds errors and lets you fix them one at a time.

If you're happy, click 'Finish & Merge' at the far right of the Mailings section, then choose 'Send Email Messages'. Click the 'To:' dropdown menu and choose the 'Email' column heading 3 (or whatever you called it in your spreadsheet). Now enter a subject line, select HTML below that 4, make sure 'All' is selected under 'Send records' 5, then click OK.

Your certificates will now be sent through Outlook. If they don't arrive, check in Outlook that your Outlook address is set as your default email - look in Settings, Account. Note that HTML files look better in some email services (for example, Outlook) than others (Gmail). Test this by sending the certificate to yourself. If there are formatting problems, you may need to send some certificates as attachments.



Click 'Preview Results', check for errors, then send your certificates as attachments

Next issue: Schedule club posts on Facebook

What's All the

Fuss About...

Green Screen of Death

Microsoft no longer wants you to feel blue when your PC fails

What is it?

The error message that Windows Insiders see when their computer crashes. This appears instead of the traditional 'Blue Screen of Death' (BSoD) in the stable version of Windows, which has been ever present since Windows NT in 1993.

Is that it pictured right?

Yes. It's a lovely shade of green, but that's not enough to stop it being a strong contender for the dullest screenshot ever published in *Computeractive*. It's not without interest though, because you may notice something is missing. Perhaps you could crash your computer and compare error screens.

Or maybe you could just tell me?

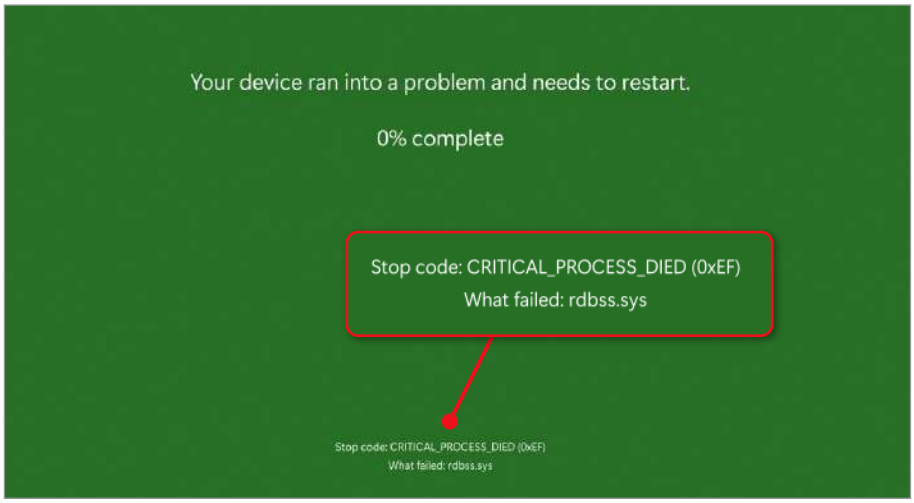
Fair enough. Microsoft has removed the 'sad face' emoticon and the QR code (as pictured below).

What did they do?

Not much really. The sad face was meant to reflect – and maybe ease – your frustration at crashing, but it was always more likely to further enrage you. Scanning the QR code was admittedly more useful, but it only took you to a generic help page (https://windows.com/stopcode) without advice for your specific problem.

Why has Microsoft got rid of them?

It wants to make everything in Windows look neater. But, this being Microsoft, it can't explain such good intentions without lapsing into infuriating jargon: "We're previewing a new, more streamlined UI for unexpected restarts which better aligns with Windows 11 design principles and supports our goal of getting users back into productivity as fast as possible" (see www.snipca.com/54400).


Your device ran into a problem and needs to restart.
0% complete
Stop code: CRITICAL_PROCESS_DIED (0xEF)
What failed: rdbss.sys

Does that mean the *blue* error screen is also being simplified?

It seems so, but it won't start appearing for a few months (and hopefully never!). And it may not even be blue anyway. Some sources say Microsoft is switching to a *black* screen of death.

I guess that's more apt. Didn't Microsoft try that once before?

Yes, in 2021. It didn't say why it switched, but it was probably to match the black backgrounds of the login and shutdown screens. It also didn't say why it soon ditched the idea, but we reckon it was due to negative feedback. After 30 years people had just become too familiar with blue being the official colour of PC catastrophe.

But Microsoft is now going back to black?

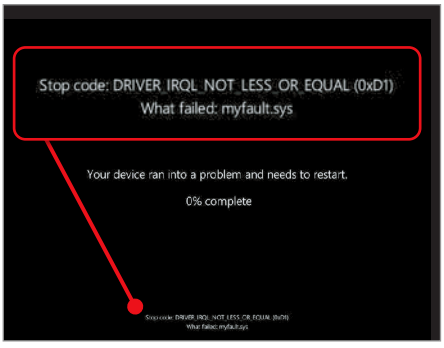
Looks like it. Several websites spotted the latest change, as did we after triggering a system crash (you can do this by editing the registry). It seems to be appearing only on Windows 11 machines running build 24H2, and like its green cousin it'll just say 'Your device ran into a problem and needs to restart'. It'll still have a 'Stop code' at the bottom though, and that's your best chance of fixing the problem.

What's a 'Stop code'?

It's Microsoft's diagnosis of what's gone wrong – not that it's much help. The black screen pictured left shows 'DRIVER_IRQL_NOT_LESS_OR_EQUAL' which means a driver tried to access a part of your PC's memory that it wasn't supposed to. But how many people know that? Still, it does at least give you something to search for online – assuming you've got another device that's working.

:(
Your PC ran into a problem and needs to restart. We're just collecting some error info, and then we'll restart for you.
0% complete

The traditional Blue Screen of Death, complete with patronising sad face and unhelpful QR code


Stop code: DRIVER_IRQL_NOT_LESS_OR_EQUAL (0xD1)
What failed: myfault.sys
Your device ran into a problem and needs to restart.
0% complete

Black might be the new blue – but that doesn't make errors any easier to understand

WINDOWS 11

The 18 Things It Does Much Better Than Windows 10

With support for Windows 10 ending soon, it's time you became a Windows 11 expert. **Daniel Booth** reveals the best new features you must use

If you listened carefully during March you might just have heard the sighs of relief coming across the Atlantic from Microsoft's Seattle headquarters. Windows 11's global market share jumped from 38.13 to 42.69 per cent (www.snipca.com/54454), while Windows 10 fell from 58.7 to 54.2 per cent. It was one of Windows 11's best ever months. At that rate it'll overtake Windows 10 by May. It's already more popular in some countries, including the UK (www.snipca.com/54455).

There will still be hundreds of millions of computers running Windows 10 when Microsoft axes support in October. That'll prove to be a major headache for the company. But there's significant momentum behind Windows 11 now, and it's well deserved. Despite an underwhelming launch in 2021 and several flawed updates since, it has grown into a brilliant operating system.

In this feature we've picked the 18 most impressive things it does better than Windows 10. We've focused on tasks you can actually do, rather than system improvements under the bonnet (you can take it as a given that it's faster, smoother and more secure). These are features you'll use often, not background processes you'll barely notice.

We've left out Copilot tips. While its new tools show promise (see page 8), we're still not convinced it's anything more than a glorified Clippy. And too many Copilot features require an expensive Copilot+ computer see (www.snipca.com/54467).

You don't need one of those to use the many excellent new features in Snipping Tool, File Explorer, Narrator and more – but you will benefit from having the 24H2 update, which isn't the buggy mess it was a few months ago (see page 57).

Follow our advice and you'll soon be mastering every aspect of Windows 11.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Turn on advanced settings to squeeze maximum speed out of your computer
- Master all of File Explorer's new tools, including tabs and unzipping new formats
- Add captions to any video playing live, whether from your PC or online
- Listen to more human-sounding voices in Narrator
- Record specific areas of your screen using Snipping Tool
- Use new AI tools to erase unwanted images in the Paint app
- Set the 'Volume mixer' to play app audio

MAKE YOUR PC RUN FASTER

1 Turn on Best Performance in power settings

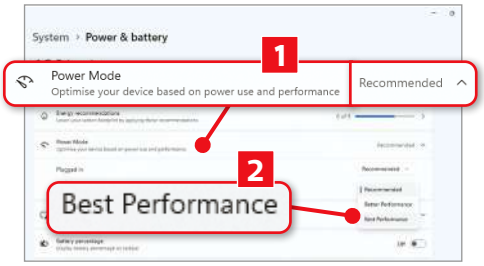
If you need to squeeze extra speed out of your Windows 10 computer, you can turn on High Performance in Control Panel's Power Options. This provides a small boost, but holds back a bit of power to save energy.

Windows 11's Best Performance mode is more aggressive, prioritising speed over power efficiency. This pushes your processor and graphics closer to the max, making games load faster and photo or video edits finish sooner – sometimes cutting seconds off certain tasks.

It's been part of Windows 11 since launch, but the 22H2 update (released September 2022) made it more effective when working with newer processors and graphics cards.

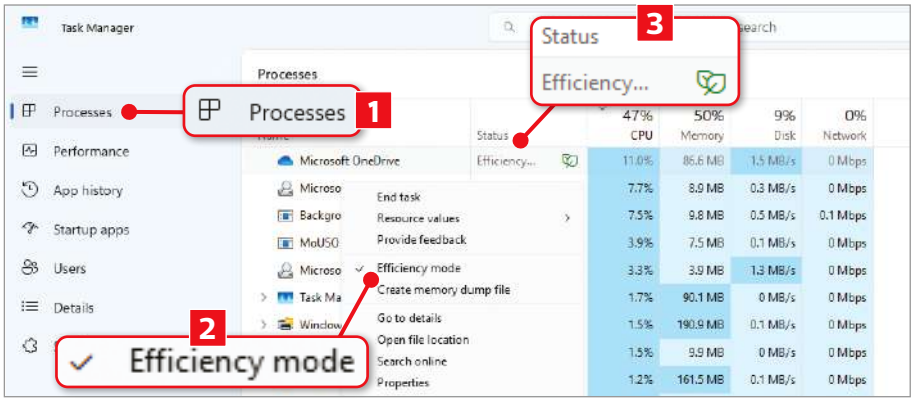
To turn it on, open Settings (press Windows key+I), then click System followed by 'Power & battery'. Now click the Power Mode dropdown menu and change Recommended (1 in our screenshot below) to 'Best Performance' 2.

You can do this for either or both of the 'Plugged in' and 'On battery' options. The former is for when your computer is plugged in and you want maximum speed (there's no downside to this because power consumption isn't a concern when plugged in). The latter is when your computer isn't plugged in, so needs to be used more carefully because it drains your battery much faster.



Choose 'Best Performance' in the Power Mode dropdown menu to squeeze out every inch of PC speed

Running your computer at full pelt has trade-offs. Your laptop will use more electricity when plugged in, nudging up your bill slightly if used a lot. If not plugged in, it'll drain the battery faster. Your computer will also give off more heat, and become noisier as the fans kick in to keep it cool. But it's an essential mode for short tasks when speed is the priority, such as exporting 4K video or working on huge spreadsheets.



To make your PC run faster, switch resource-hungry apps and processes to Efficiency Mode in Task Manager, and confirm the change in the Status column

2 Make your apps run more efficiently

Another way to make your computer run faster is to reduce how much power your processor devotes to programs or Windows processes you're not currently using. Windows 11 22H2 made this easier by introducing an Efficiency Mode.

Search for and open Task Manager (or press Ctrl+Shift+Esc), then click the Processes tab (1 in our screenshot above). Now click the CPU tab and the column will show which apps and processes are using the most processor resources – from most to least. If an app you don't need to use is devouring a lot of processor power, right-click it and select 'Efficiency mode' 2. This will be confirmed in the Status column 3.

However, if the column is updating too quickly to click the correct app, click Details on the left, then right-click the app and turn on the mode there.

This mode is particularly useful for apps or processes that you need to access regularly but not continuously – say once or twice a day. Think of apps like Dropbox or OneDrive that sync in the background, and email tools like Outlook and Thunderbird that check for new emails.

Note however that Windows greys out the Efficiency Mode option for apps and processes it deems to be critical, or for those that have their own power-saving settings like Chrome. Also, the mode stays enabled only for your current session, so you'll need to set it again when you next reboot.

The closest Windows 10 gets to this is Control Panel's Power Options, but these apply only across your whole computer, not specific programs.

Check whether your graphics card supports DirectStorage

3 Make games load faster

DirectStorage is a Windows tool that makes games load faster, by speeding up how quickly data can move between NVMe SSDs and Direct X12 graphics cards. This is reasonably fast in Windows 10, but it's supersonic in 11 because it can work with newer SSDs.

It's turned on by default, so you should check whether your computer has the correct SSD and graphics card to take advantage. Press Windows key+G to open Windows Game Bar, then click the Settings cog icon at the top. Now click 'Gaming features' on the left (1 in our screenshot above) and check whether it shows 'DirectStorage optimized/supported' to the right of GPU 2. Also check whether your computer supports Direct X12 Ultimate 3, which is the latest version. If so, DirectStorage will work even faster.

For extra confirmation, check your SSD is NVMe by opening Task Manager, then clicking Performance and looking under the Disc heading just to the right. If it says 'SSD (NVMe)' then you're in luck.

DirectStorage is still an emerging and complex technology so only a handful of games support it at the moment, including Forspoken, Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart, Forza Motorsport and Horizon Forbidden West. Many more are likely to adopt it in future though.

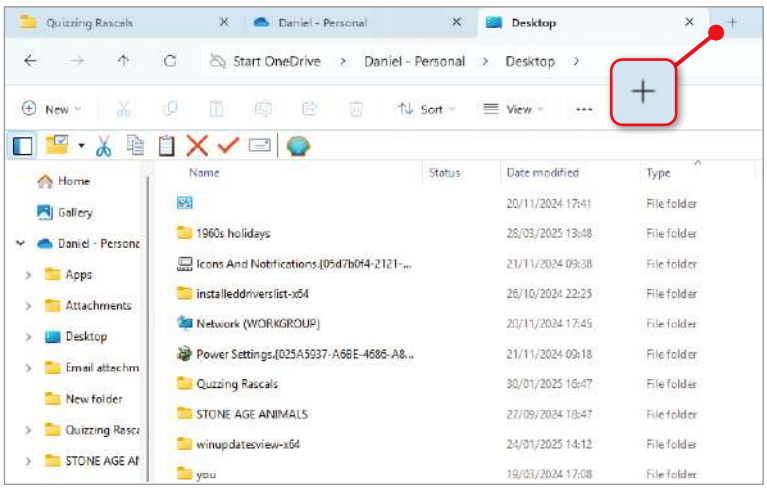
HACK FILE EXPLORER TO MAKE IT BETTER

4 Open folders in tabs

None of Windows' key tools has improved as much as File Explorer. The best feature – unique to Windows 11 – is tabbed browsing, which lets you open multiple folders in a single window, just as you would with browser tabs.

Open File Explorer and click the plus (+) button next to the current tab (see screenshot right). You can also press Ctrl+T, while Ctrl+Tab switches between tabs. To move a file between folders, drag it to the appropriate tab at the top.

If you want to use Explorer tabs in Windows 10, you'll need to install a separate program such as Files (https://files.community) or QTTabBar (www.snipca.com/54394), both of which are free. Without them, you'd have to open a separate window for each folder, cluttering your screen.



Click the plus (+) button in File Explorer to open a new tab

5 Extract RAR, 7z and TAR files

Another improvement that cuts the need for third-party software is File Explorer's support for file-compression formats RAR, 7z and TAR, which Microsoft added as part of last autumn's 24H2 update. Previously – and still on Windows 10 – you'd have to install programs such as WinRAR (www.win-rar.com) and 7-Zip (www.7-zip.org).

Right-click a file in File Explorer then select 'Compress to' (1 in our screenshot below left) to see a choice of formats 2. Clicking 'Additional options' 3 brings up advanced settings, the most useful of which is a 'Compression level' slider that lets you balance speed of compression with file size. Move it to the left for faster compression but larger files, and to the right for slower compression but smaller files.

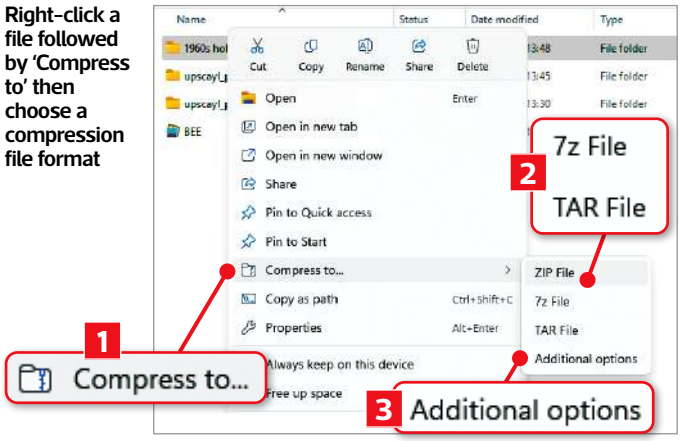
Unzipping files in Windows 11 will soon be faster too, following a recent speed tweak in Preview Build 27818 for Windows Insiders on the Canary Channel. Microsoft said that in particular "unzipping a large number of small files" will be a lot quicker (see www.snipca.com/54367).

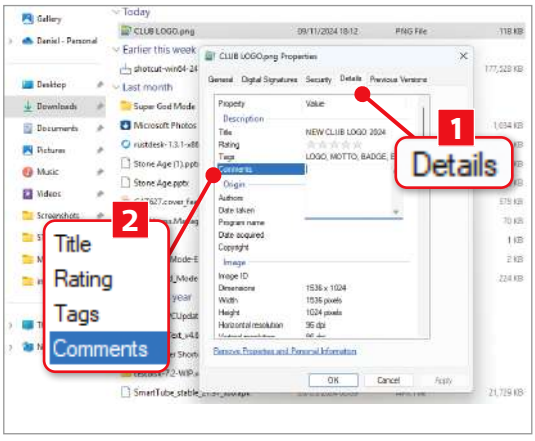
6 Edit metadata in PNG files

Also new in 24H2 is the ability to edit the metadata of PNG files – an image format used for graphics, logos, charts and illustrations. Right-click a PNG file then select Properties followed by the Details tab (1 in our screenshot below).

Now click the space to the right of each heading, such as Title, Rating, Tags and Comments 2 and add the relevant data. Click OK to save. You can use this new metadata to search for PNGs on your PC. For example, you could tag a PNG of a chart with '2025 Expenses' and search for that to find it easily. To edit PNG files in Windows 10, use third-party software, such as ExifTool (https://exiftool.org).

Right-click a file followed by 'Compress to' then choose a compression file format





Edit PNG metadata in Windows 11, including Title, Rating, Tags and Comments

MASTER NEW ACCESSIBILITY TOOLS

7 Control your computer using Voice Access

Windows 10's Speech Recognition isn't bad, but it's hardly the comprehensive voice-controlled system many people need.

Windows 11's Voice Access takes it to a different level with more advanced spoken commands and improved features.

To use it, press Windows key+Ctrl+S. You can also open Settings then click Accessibility followed by Speech under the Interaction heading, then move the 'Voice access' slider at the top. In Settings you can also decide whether to make 'Voice access' start before or after you sign into your PC. You'll find a full list of commands at www.snipca.com/54408, or by asking "What can I say?".

When it starts you need to say 'voice access wake up' or press the microphone button at the top left (1 in our screenshot above right). If it's working you'll see 'Listening' at the top left 2, which then changes to whatever it has heard you say.

Control your computer with spoken commands by turning on 'Voice access'

Microsoft added more "natural sounding" commands in the 24H2 update (for example, "open my music" rather than simply "open music"). It also improved automatic punctuation, which you can turn on by clicking the top-right cog icon and selecting 'Manage options' 3.

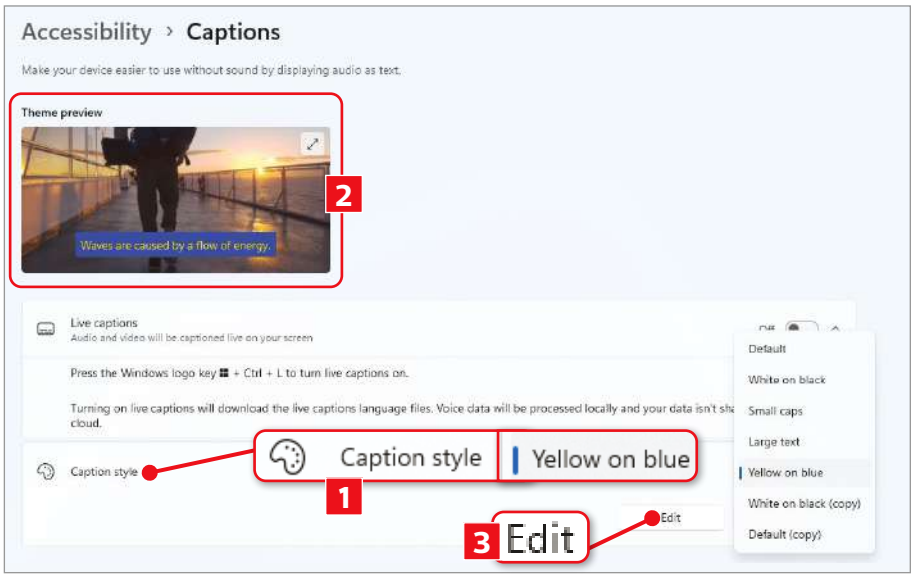
Also new in 24H2 are voice shortcuts, letting you create your own commands for tasks you perform often. Microsoft provides full instructions at www.snipca.com/54409.

8 Add live captions to any video

Windows 10 doesn't have system-wide captions. Instead you have to rely on settings within specific software. The 22H2 update for Windows 11 brought captions to any video you're playing, whether downloaded to your desktop or online (on YouTube, for example). It works in real time, so will provide captions for live broadcasts (perfect for sports and news). It also captions anything captured by your microphone, so works during online video chats.

Turn on captions by pressing Windows key+Ctrl+L, or by opening Settings then clicking Accessibility followed by Captions and turning on the slider. You'll need to click 'Yes, continue' at the top to confirm, then select 'English (United Kingdom)'.

The default caption style is white words on a black background written in the Segoe UI font. You can change this to yellow on blue in the Captions section of Settings by clicking the dropdown menu to the right of 'Caption style' (1 in our screenshot above). You can also make the text larger, though only in white on black. You can see what each change looks like by clicking the 'Theme preview' box above 2. If none of Microsoft's options suit you, click Edit 3 and use the colour, opacity, size, font and effects menus to create your own style.


Accessibility › Captions
Make your device easier to use without sound by displaying audio as text.
Theme preview
Waves are caused by a flow of energy.
2
Live captions
Audio and video will be captioned live on your screen
Press the Windows logo key + Ctrl + L to turn live captions on.
Turning on live captions will download the live captions language files. Voice data will be processed locally and your data isn't sha
cloud.
Caption style
Caption style
Yellow on blue
1
3
Edit
Edit
Default
White on black
Small caps
Large text
Yellow on blue
White on black (copy)
Default (copy)

You can change the caption style so it uses different fonts, colours and sizes

Once that's done, give the caption style a name. It will be added to the 'Caption style' menu on the previous page, ready for you to select. When a video is playing click the top-right cog, then Position to move the captions above your screen, below it, or within a moveable floating box.

9 Listen to more human-sounding screen readers

Ryan and Sonia are waiting to be downloaded in Windows 11. They're two 'Natural' voices Microsoft added to Narrator in 2023, and while still artificial they sound much more realistic than their robotic predecessors in Windows 10. They both have English accents, but you can choose Natural US voices if you prefer.

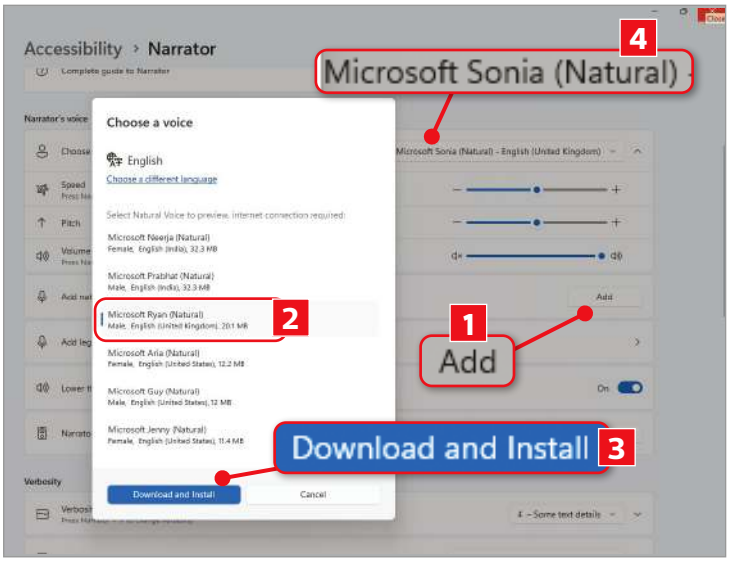
Open Settings then click Accessibility followed by Narrator on the right, in the Vision section. Click the 'Add' button to the right of 'Add natural voices' (1 in our screenshot below left), then select a voice to hear it 2. If you like it, click 'Download and Install' 3. It will appear as an option in the 'Choose a voice' dropdown menu 4.

As well as more realistic voices, Windows 11's Narrator is smoother overall – crashing far less than before.

Also, last year, Microsoft added more keyboard shortcuts, including Narrator key+Ctrl+X to copy the last phrase spoken, letting you paste it as normal using Ctrl+V. Press Narrator key+Shift+B and Narrator will announce if your laptop is plugged in for charging, followed by battery status, network name and network status. Incidentally, the Narrator key is either Caps Lock or Insert.

Microsoft also added new shortcuts to Scan Mode, which lets you skip through content using arrow keys and specific shortcuts: press L to go to lists on the page, and N to bypass a block of links. These are helpful when you're trying to get to the main content on a web page. You can turn on Scan Mode by pressing the Narrator key+spacebar.

Visit www.snipca.com/54417 to compare all shortcuts and touchscreen gestures between Windows 10 and 11.



Choose more human-sounding Narrator voices in Windows 11

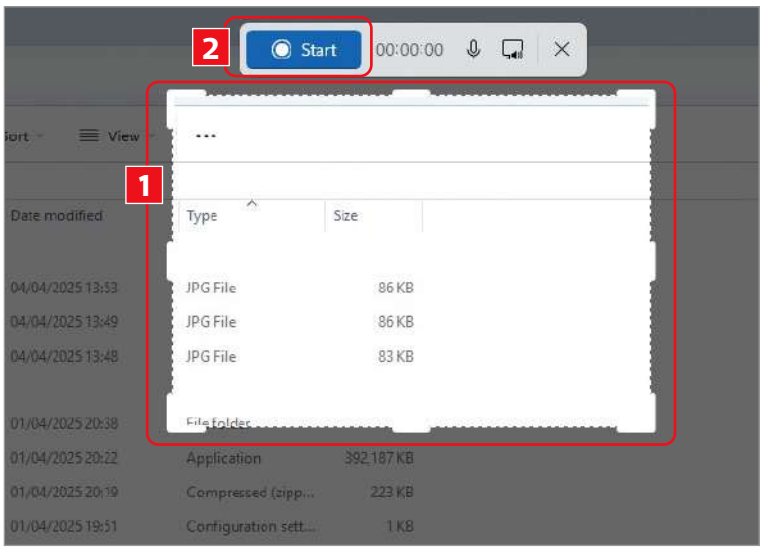
10 Record parts of your screen with Snipping Tool

Microsoft has revamped Snipping Tool in Windows 11 as a screen-recording app, with the extra benefit of capturing just areas of your screen rather than the whole thing. Screen-recording in Windows 10 remains limited to full-screen captures in Game Bar (press Windows key+G), and it doesn't work on your desktop or in File Explorer.

Open Snipping Tool in Windows 11 by pressing Windows key+Shift+S. Now click the Record icon and move the plus-sign cursor to mark the area you want to record (1 in our screenshot). Press the blue Start button 2 then the red 'Stop recording' button to finish. It'll be saved as an MP4.

Click the 'Microphone' icon to record your voice as you capture your screen. To turn on the mic by default for every screen recording, search for and open the Snipping Tool, then click the top-right menu (three horizontal dots) followed by Settings. Scroll down and turn on 'Include microphone input by default when a screen recording starts'.

Here, you'll also find settings for automatically saving your screen recordings and changing where they are saved. Look out soon for the 'trim' feature – see box opposite.



Select the area to record, then press the blue Start button

11 Add coloured borders to your screenshots

The latest version of Sticky Notes, released last summer, lets you paste screenshots straight into a note. By default it adds a light-blue border to the screenshot, but you can change this if it's

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WHAT'S COMING SOON TO WINDOWS 11

Taskbar icons will automatically get smaller to keep more apps visible and clickable without you having to open another menu: www.snipca.com/54444.

Larger Start menu with everything on a single scrollable page (see screenshot below). The 'All apps' list is below Recommendations, which you can disable: www.snipca.com/54443.

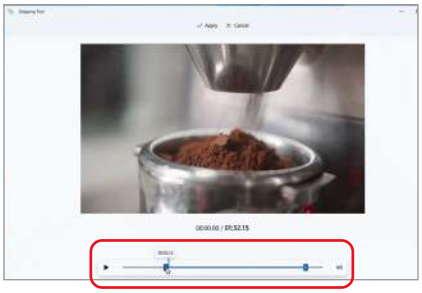
A new 'drag tray' will appear at the top of your screen when you drag a file from File Explorer or your desktop, letting you drop it into one of the programs shown: www.snipca.com/54444.

Narrator is getting a 'Speech recap' tool that shows a history of things it has said recently, triggered by the keyboard shortcut Narrator key+Alt+X: www.snipca.com/54445.

The 'Windows share' window will let you crop, rotate and compress images, as well as apply filters, before you share them: www.snipca.com/54445.

A new 'Frequently Asked Questions' (FAQ) section in Settings will show "answers to common questions about your PC and Windows 11". It'll be on the System, About page: www.snipca.com/54445.

Snipping Tool is getting a 'trim' feature for adjusting the start and end times of your recordings to remove any "unnecessary video snippets" (see screenshot below): www.snipca.com/54446.



not what you want.

Launch the Sticky Notes app then click 'Screenshot' (1 in our screenshot below) and the page you're currently on will appear in the app. Now click the three dots 2 and pick one of the colours that appears 3. You can keep clicking until you've found a colour you like. Above the screenshot you'll see details of where it comes from. If it's from a browser, you'll see its icon – Chrome in our example 4; if it's from Windows you'll see the relevant icon – as in the Settings cog here 5. There are also options for copying the note and deleting it.

This new-look Sticky Notes is actually part of OneNote. To open it for the first time, search for and open OneNote (or install it from the Microsoft Store if you need to) then sign into your Microsoft account. Now click Sticky Notes at the top right of OneNote's toolbar. You only need to do this once because afterwards it'll be available from the Start menu and Taskbar (where you can pin it as usual).

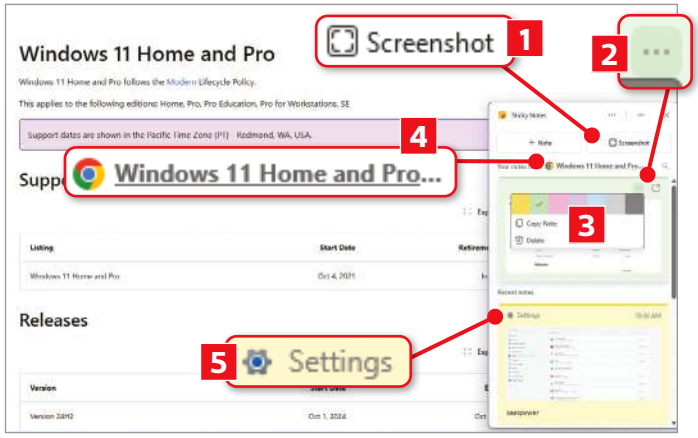
12 Use AI to erase elements from Paint app

Microsoft's big AI bet is Copilot (see page 8), but more useful are the new tools in its revamped Paint app. The first to arrive was 'Generative erase', now available to everyone, which removes unwanted images by guessing what should be behind an object based on the background.

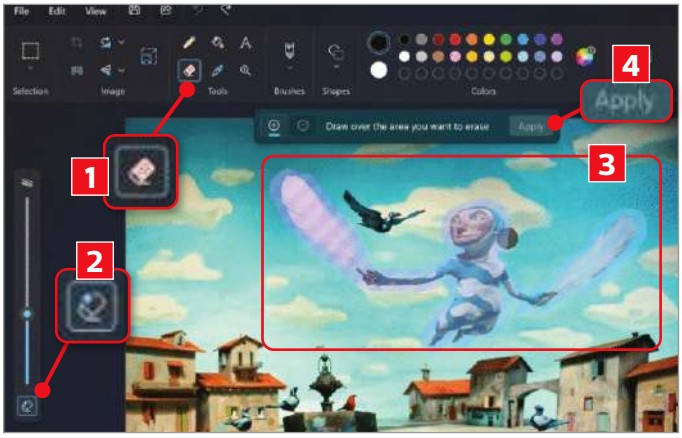
Add an image to Paint, then click the Eraser icon at the top (1 in our screenshot below right), followed by the 'Generative erase' icon below the vertical slider on the left 2. Use your mouse to move the brush over what you want to remove 3. When you've selected what needs removing, click Apply 4 and you'll see a box appear over that area. After a few seconds it will show you the resulting effect.

Microsoft is also working on 'Generative fill', which lets you edit images with typed commands. It's currently available only on Copilot+ computers running a Snapdragon processor, but will hopefully come to more machines soon (see box above for more Windows 11 features in the pipeline).

Don't forget that 'Generative erase' also works in the Photos app, both in Windows 11 *and* 10 – see Issue 706's Cover Feature (page 56). Open a photo, then click Edit top left, followed by the Background icon. Now choose Blur, Remove or Replace.



Add coloured borders to screenshots in the latest version of Sticky Notes



Use Paint's 'Generative Erase' to remove unwanted background items

IMPROVE YOUR AUDIO & VIDEO

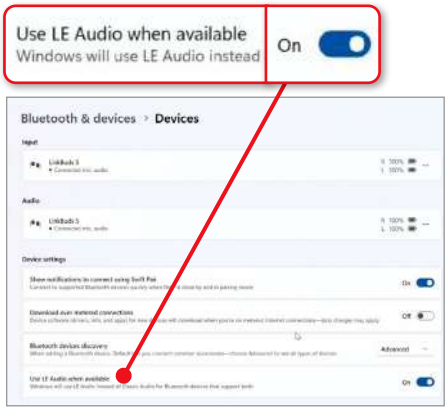
13 Improve Bluetooth audio quality

Bluetooth 5.2, released in early 2020, contains LE Audio technology, which improves sound quality when streaming to earbuds and hearing aids. It uses less power too, making those devices last longer between charges.

Windows 11 added support for Bluetooth LE Audio in 2023, and enhanced this in last year's 24H2 update to include compatible hearing aids (see Issue 699's How To, page 35). But your computer needs a Bluetooth 5.2 (or later) adapter that supports LE Audio. These are usually provided by the manufacturer of your Bluetooth processor (such as Intel, Qualcomm or Broadcom).

To check you have LE Audio, open Settings, then click 'Bluetooth & devices' on the left. Now click 'Devices' on the right, then scroll down to the 'Device settings' section. Here, look for the setting 'Use LE Audio when available' and turn it on.

If it's not there, your computer isn't compatible. You should then search for Bluetooth 5.2 updates on your manufacturer's website (one of the three above) and try to install it.

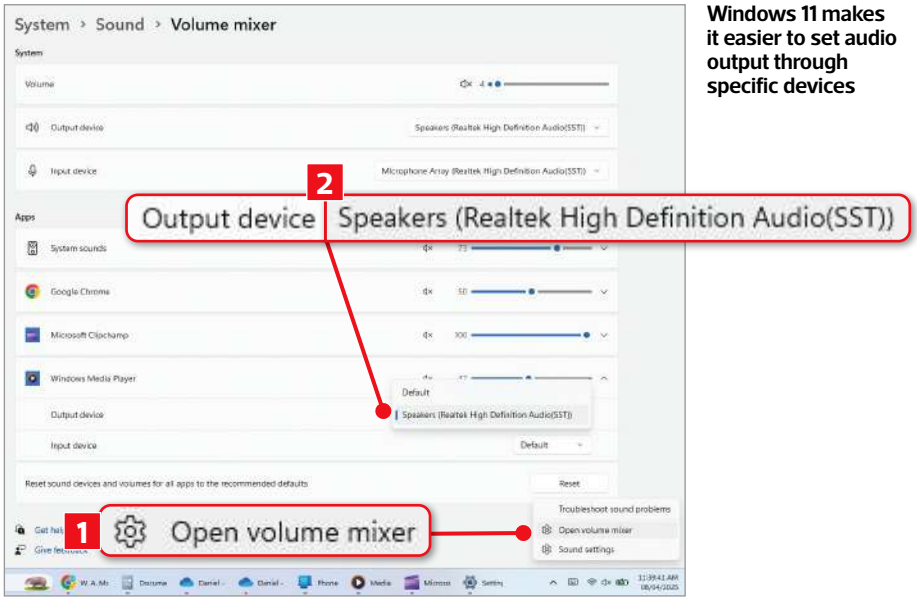


Turn on 'Use LE Audio when available' in the Devices section of Windows Settings

14 Set audio to play through specific devices

This feature isn't entirely new in Windows 11, but it's so much easier to apply that it feels that way. Like Windows 10 it lets you choose which device each app's audio plays through. For example, you could have your music app running through your Bluetooth earbuds while keeping video calls on your desktop speakers. But changing these settings is so much easier in Windows 11.

Right-click the volume icon in the taskbar, then click 'Open volume mixer' (1 in our screenshot above). This takes you straight to the 'Volume mixer' deep in Windows settings, where you'll see which apps are playing audio. Click the dropdown arrow next to one then pick the input and output device you want 2.



Windows 11 makes it easier to set audio output through specific devices

Also, get into the habit of clicking the volume icon in the taskbar followed by the 'Select a sound output' icon at the right (or press Windows key+Ctrl+V). This takes you to a small menu where you can quickly switch output devices.

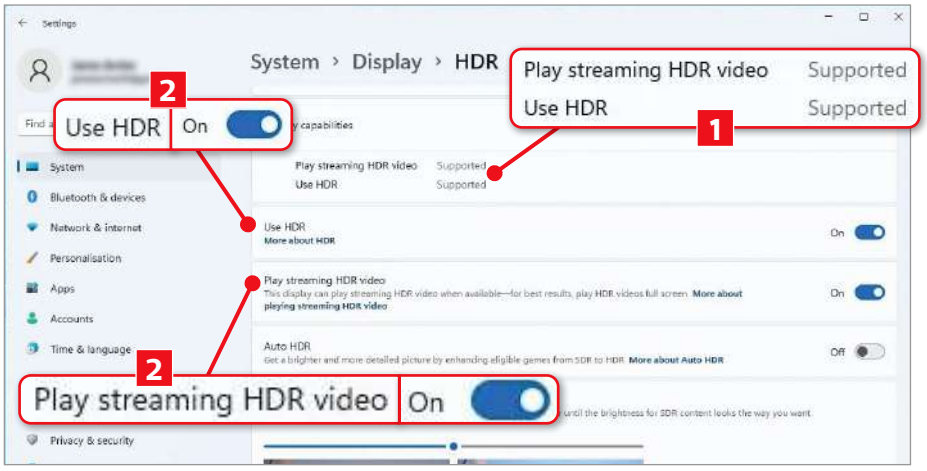
15 Turn on Auto HDR for sharper games

Windows 10 supports High Dynamic Range (HDR), which enhances image quality in games by letting screens show a wider range of brightness and contrast levels. However, it's a system-wide setting that tries to make *all* games HDR. This is fine for content that supports HDR, but it makes anything in standard resolution (SDR) look washed out.

Windows 11 fixes this with an 'Auto HDR' setting that leaves HDR games as they are, but transforms SDR games to match some of the amazing visuals without diluting the overall effect.

Open Settings, then click System on the left followed by Display on the right. Check whether your monitor supports both HDR options (1 in our screenshot below), and if so turn on both settings 2. HDR is becoming more common in monitors, with some decent models available now for under £200 – see Laptops Direct: www.snipca.com/54477.

Another useful setting in Game Bar changes the intensity of the HDR effects, making images brighter or darker. Press Windows key+G then the top-right settings cog followed by 'Gaming features'. Now move the 'Adjust HDR Intensity' slider while playing a game to suit your taste, then click Done.



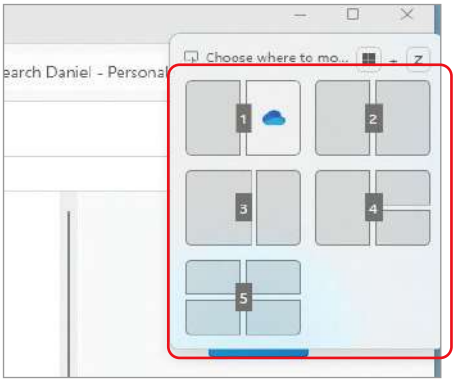
Turn on these HDR settings to improve image quality in games and videos

ENHANCE YOUR DESKTOP AND WIDGETS

16 Set up Snap Layouts

Snap Layouts have been in Windows 11 since it launched, and are much more flexible than the options in Windows 10 – which comprise drag-to-edge snapping, as well as 'Cascade windows', 'Show windows stacked' and 'Show windows side by side' when you right-click the taskbar.

First, open Settings, then click System followed by Multi-tasking and turn on 'Snap windows'. Now hover over a window's 'Maximise' icon (or press Windows key+Z) and your 'snap layout' grid will appear top right. Microsoft has regularly added new options to Snap Layouts since its launch, including numbers on the layouts (see screenshot below) when you press Windows key+Z. Press a number key to move to that layout, then another number to fill a specific zone within it.

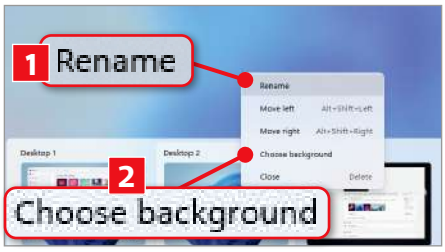


Press a number in Snap Layouts to choose a particular grid

17 Rename multiple desktops & set different backgrounds

Where Windows 10 had virtual desktops, Windows 11 has *multiple* desktops. They're essentially the same thing, but more customisable. Press Windows key+Tab to open Task View, then 'New desktop' to create one.

New features in Windows 11 include right-clicking to rename them (1 in our screenshot above right), and to choose specific backgrounds for each 2. For the



Windows 11's multiple desktops let you rename them and change their backgrounds

latter, make sure you choose Picture in the 'Personalise your background' dropdown menu. Combine these options to create distinct desktops that are easy to spot and open.

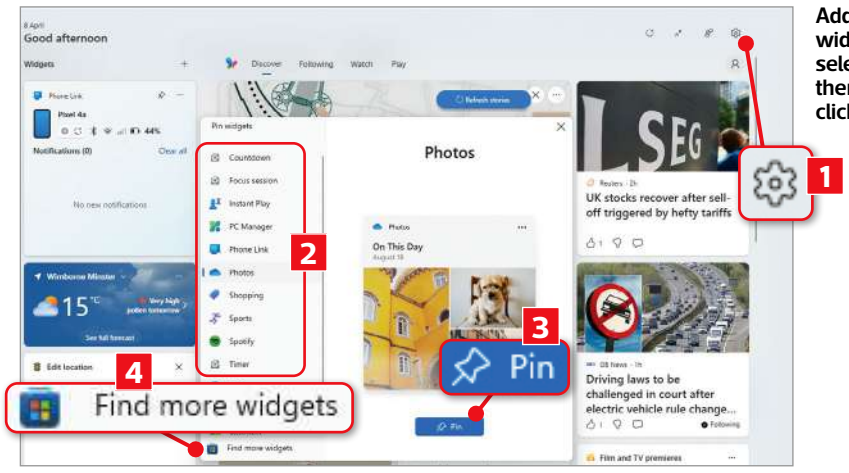
18 Add new widgets and set your location

Nothing has surprised us more in Windows 11 than how useful widgets are. In Windows 10 (and earlier versions) they just seemed like desktop clutter.

Open them by pressing Windows key+W. Two of the most helpful – weather and traffic – need to know your location to give you localised information. Open Windows Settings, then click 'Privacy & security' followed by Location on the right. Turn on the sliders next to 'Location services', 'Let apps access your location' and Weather.

If you need to change your traffic location, click the three dots top right followed by 'Customise widget'. Now click 'Specify default location' then type and select the place you want.

Add new widgets by clicking the top-right cog (1 in our screenshot below) followed by 'Discover new widgets'. Click one you want 2 then click 'Pin' 3, or search for new ones in the Microsoft Store 4. ca



Add new widgets by selecting them, then clicking Pin

Has Microsoft fixed all the 24H2 bugs?

As recently as Issue 702 (page 62) we recommended avoiding the 24H2 update because it had more bugs than a Peruvian rainforest. But Microsoft has released key updates since, fixing problems with audio, Bluetooth, webcams, File Explorer and several other functions. Some glitches remain, but they affect more niche software, such as sound-boosting program Dirac Audio and gaming tool Easy Anti-Cheat (see more at www.snipca.com/54481). For most users 24H2 is now fit for purpose. And in any case, if your computer is likely to struggle, Microsoft might place a 'safeguard hold' on it, preventing it from upgrading to 24H2.

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ISSUE 703 | 12 – 25 FEBRUARY 2025
Miss Daisy drives scammers mad – page 9
Learn something new in every issue
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Set up mobile hotspots on your PC & phone p35
BREAK WINDOWS' WORST RULES
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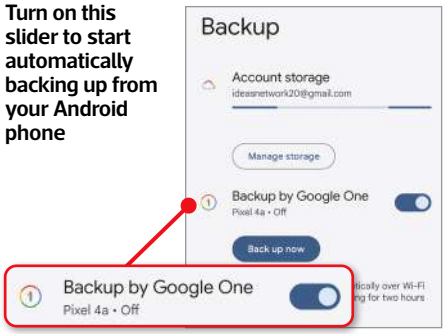
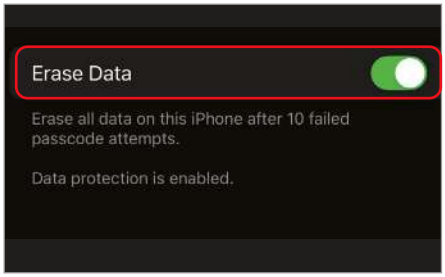
Phone theft: What to do before and after

Jonathan Parkyn explains the preventative measures you need to take in case your phone is stolen – and how to respond if it happens

Before taking any of the following steps, make a note of your device's IMEI and serial numbers – you may need these when making an insurance claim or reporting a theft. On an iPhone, tap Settings, General, then About to find these. On an Android device, tap Settings followed by 'About phone'. Note these details down somewhere safe. Once you've done that you can move on to the tips below.



Turn on this slider to start automatically backing up from your Android phone



Switch on Erase Data so your iPhone will wipe all data on it after 10 failed attempts

Make sure your data is being backed up

If your phone is stolen, you risk losing not only the phone itself, but also the data on it – photos, messages, music and much more. The simplest way to prevent this is to turn on your phone's backup tool. Android users should find this under Settings, Google, 'All services', Backup, then 'Backup by Google One' (see screenshot above right) – though the precise location can vary from device to another. On an iPhone, tap Settings followed by your name at the top. Now tap iCloud, then iCloud Backup and turn on 'Back Up This iPhone'.

In both cases, your phone's data is automatically backed up to Google or Apple's online storage, making it easy to restore everything to any new phone. Unfortunately, it's unlikely Apple's (5GB) or Google's (15GB) free storage will be enough, so you may have to pay for more storage. Apple's iCloud Drive costs from 99p a month for 50GB (www.snipca.com/53696), while Google's start at £1.59 a month for 100GB (www.snipca.com/53695).

Bear in mind that some apps contain data not included in your phone's standard backup. WhatsApp is a good example – you'll need to turn on its own backup. From the main Chats screen, tap the three vertical dots button (Android only) followed by Settings, Chats, then 'Chat backup'. We covered backing up your phone chats in more detail in Issue 703, page 62 – buy a back issue from www.snipca.com/54418.

Lock your phone screen

Locking your phone screen is essential if you want to prevent a thief from accessing information. Go to Settings, 'Security and privacy', then 'Screen lock' (Android) or Settings, 'Face ID/Touch ID and Passcode' (iOS) to set up a secure PIN or Passcode. Make sure it's something impossible for anyone else to guess. And, wherever possible, turn on biometric options, such as fingerprint or face recognition.

Also set your device to lock immediately after the screen turns off. You may additionally want to go to your device's Display settings and set Auto-Lock (iPhone) or 'Screen timeout' (Android) to one of the shorter options – 30 seconds, say. This will reduce the chance of your device being unlocked when a thief makes a grab for it.

By default, most modern Android phones will permanently lock you out after too many incorrect attempts to enter your PIN. This prevents determined crooks from using brute-force attacks to gain access. If you own an iPhone, you can even set it to erase the data on your device after 10 failed passcode attempts. Tap Settings, 'Face ID/Touch ID and Passcode', then scroll right down to the Erase Data setting and switch it on (see screenshot above).

Lock your SIM and USB port

In addition to locking the phone itself, you should also set a SIM PIN – this will prevent crooks hijacking your SIM by putting it into another device. On an

Seven things you must do if your phone is stolen

1 Try calling it – just in case your phone has been lost not stolen, and is somewhere in your own home or with someone who's willing to help.

2 Log into Google's Find My Device (www.snipca.com/54442) or Apple's Find Devices (www.icloud.com/find) to see if the device can be located. If you're certain your phone has been stolen, make a note of its location and click 'Factory reset device' (Android) or Erase (iOS) to wipe it remotely.

3 Report the theft to your provider, which will lock your SIM to prevent unauthorised calls, and send you a new SIM with your old number. Ask them for your IMEI number, if you haven't already made a note of it.

4 Watch out for unauthorised and suspicious activity in your accounts, especially bank, email and social media.

5 Change your passwords for all your important accounts (Apple ID, Google, banking, email, and social media) to limit any damage, should a thief somehow access your phone's contents.

6 Report the crime by calling 101 and talking to your local police station. Make sure you get a crime reference number.

7 If your phone is covered by your home insurance or if you have a separate policy, contact the provider as soon as possible to make your claim. You'll need to provide your crime reference number.

iPhone, the option is in Settings, Mobile Service, then SIM PIN. On Android, look in Settings, 'Security and privacy', then 'More security settings'.

Clever criminals may be able to access your phone by connecting it to another device via USB. Prevent this by blocking the USB port when the phone is locked. On an iPhone, tap Settings, 'Face ID/Touch ID and Passcode' and disable the Accessories option under 'Allow Access When Locked'. Most Android phones block USB access by default when locked. But on some Samsung phones, you may need to tap Settings, 'Security and privacy', 'More security settings' and enable 'Block USB connections while locked'.

Set up 'Find my device' and anti-theft features

Modern phones let you locate and remotely lock or erase them, but they're not turned on by default. On Android, tap Settings, 'Security and privacy', Find My Device (this might be in the 'Device finders' section) and turn on Use Find My Device (see screenshot below). If you have a Samsung device, tap Settings, your Samsung account, 'Find my mobile' and switch on 'Allow this phone to be found'.

On an iPhone, tap Settings, your name, Find My, 'Find My iPhone' and make sure this setting is enabled. Switching on 'Find your offline devices' (Android) or 'Find My network' and 'Send Last Location' (iOS) can help improve your chances of locating a stolen device.

Find My Device
If you lose this device or any connected Fast Pair accessories, you can use Find My Device to locate them
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Ways to use Find My Device
Find My Device app
Get it on Google Play

Turn on 'Use Find My Device' in Android so you can remotely lock your phone

iPhone users running iOS 17.3 or higher have Stolen Device Protection, which requires biometric verification (Face or Touch ID) to access sensitive information and settings when iOS detects your iPhone is in an unfamiliar location. This means thieves who have somehow gained access to both your phone and your passcode will be blocked from changing your Apple ID, disabling Find My iPhone and more. You can enable Stolen Device Protection under Settings, 'Face ID/Touch ID and Passcode'.

Similarly, Android and Samsung users get Theft Protection – it's usually found in Settings, 'Security and privacy', then 'Device lock', but you may need to search your Settings app. It has two useful anti-theft features: 'Theft detection lock' uses motion detection to lock your device if someone grabs your phone and runs off with it; and 'Offline device lock', which locks your phone shortly after it goes offline, protecting your data if a thief engages Airplane mode to make your device untraceable.

Lock your accounts with two-factor apps

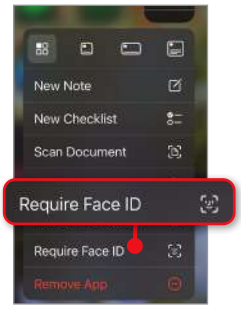
Many two-factor authentication (2FA) systems work by sending you a code via a text message to your mobile number. If your mobile has been stolen, you won't be able to access these accounts yourself until you've got a new phone and a replacement SIM with the same number from your mobile provider – and there's a chance your thieves could receive any 2FA codes via text if they have your phone.

Where possible, it's best to set up 2FA to use an authenticator app rather than SMS. For instance, log into your PayPal account at www.paypal.com, and click the Settings cog, Security, '2-step verification' and select 'Use an authenticator app'.

We recommend using an app that supports online backup too, as this provides a way for you to restore your accounts instantly on a replacement device. In Microsoft Authenticator (www.snipca.com/54421), for example, tap Menu, then Settings, and make sure the Backup option is enabled.

Lock down specific apps

Some apps – including those for many banking and financial services – let you lock them using biometric sign-in. With iOS 18, it's also possible to lock any app with Face ID or Touch ID – long-press the app icon and select Require Face ID/Touch ID from the menu (see screenshot right). This may be worth doing for apps that contain sensitive info, but bear in mind it's easy enough to bypass if a thief has your iPhone's passcode.



In iOS 18, long-press an app's icon and select Require Face ID/Touch ID from the menu

Android doesn't currently have an equivalent feature, but there are apps available that will allow you to lock apps. Unfortunately, most free app lock tools can be easily bypassed simply by uninstalling them. You're better off signing up to a premium security app, such as Bitdefender Mobile Security (£15 a year, www.snipca.com/54391), which includes an app lock function that can't be easily removed. ca

File formats that will soon DIE

Some of the formats you save files in may not be around for much longer. **Robert Irvine** reveals nine formats at risk of becoming obsolete – and what to use instead

There are hundreds of old file formats tied to programs that are now discontinued. This can cause frustration when you can't open an important file because you don't have the software to do so. But even some well-known and widely used formats may not be with us for much longer, as newer and better options take their place. Here we predict which formats may soon become obsolete, and recommend what to use instead to preserve your data.

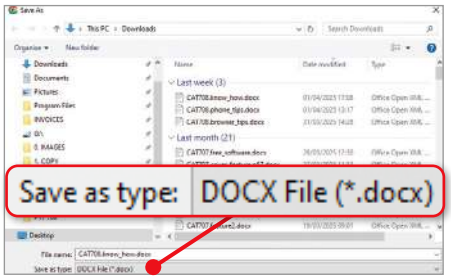
DEFINITELY DYING

RTF

RTF (Rich Text Format, .rtf) was once the standard file format for preserving the formatting of text, including bold, italics, fonts and colours, across different programs and operating systems. It's most commonly associated with Microsoft Word, allowing you to open documents saved in the format when you don't have Word installed. However, Microsoft stopped developing RTF in 2008, and the format is now considered deprecated.

What to use instead

Microsoft's **DOCX** (.docx) format has superseded RTF and is now supported by most word-processing tools, including Google Docs, LibreOffice and OnlyOffice. Alternatively, **PDF** does a reliable job of preserving text (and image) formatting, though you generally need to convert files to DOCX or similar format to edit their content.



DOCX replaced DOC as the default file format for Word documents

DOC and XLS

DOC (.doc) and XLS (.xls) were the default file formats for Word documents and Excel spreadsheets until Microsoft released Office 2007. Both are now deprecated (rather than discontinued), but you may still come across old files saved in those formats, which can cause compatibility issues when you try to open them.

What to use instead

Microsoft introduced the XML-based DOCX (see screenshot above) and **XLSX** (.xlsx) formats in the Office 2007 versions of Word and Excel, and they remain the defaults for documents and spreadsheets. They're more secure (with better protection against malicious macros), support more features and store more information in smaller file sizes.

WMV

Microsoft's WMV (Windows Media Video, .wmv) format hasn't been officially discontinued, but its popularity has significantly declined in recent years, in line with its associated program Windows Media Player. Most video-sharing services including YouTube don't support WMV, and even Microsoft now leans towards alternative video formats.

What to use instead

MP4 (MPEG-4 Part 14,.mp4) is now the most popular video format, compatible with all media players, browsers, video services and most devices. It supports the latest codecs such as H.264 and H.265, provides excellent picture quality at smaller file sizes and supports subtitles, multiple audio tracks and metadata.

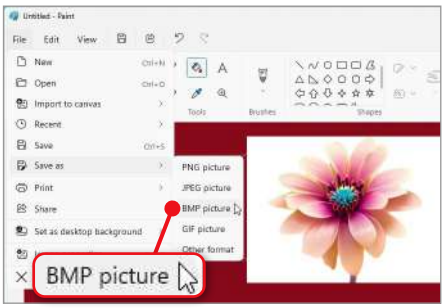
PROBABLY DYING

BMP

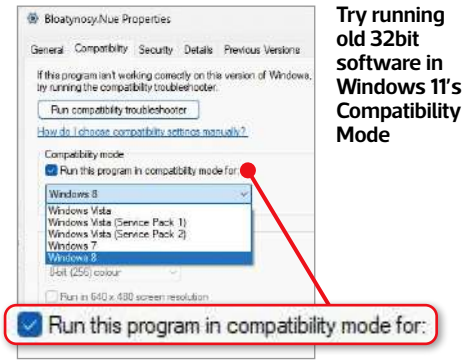
The BMP (Bitmap Picture, .bmp) format dates back to the first version of Windows in 1985, when it was introduced as a means of storing pixel-based images. Although BMP is still maintained by Microsoft – it remains an image-storage option in the Paint and Photos apps in Windows 11 (see screenshot above right) – it's no longer widely used because its lack of compression results in large file sizes, and it doesn't support features such as layers and metadata.

What to use instead

PNG (Portable Network Graphics, .png) offers a superior way to save and share images on your PC. It uses lossless



Paint still supports the BMP image format but it's no longer widely used



Try running old 32bit software in Windows 11's Compatibility Mode

compression to reduce file size without sacrificing image quality, allows for images with variable levels of transparency and is supported by all image editors, web browsers and operating systems.

RAR

The file-archive format RAR (Roshal Archive, .rar) was once many tech experts' preferred alternative to ZIP, offering higher compression and stronger security via AES-256 encryption. To use it, you needed the freemium program WinRAR, but that's now only true when creating RAR files. Other compression tools and File Explorer in Windows 11 (see page 52) can unpack RAR archives, but that hasn't increased the format's popularity. It also suffers security flaws – see page 7.

What to use instead

ZIP is the best way to compress and decompress files, because it's supported by all the main operating systems without needing third-party software. For compression connoisseurs, the **7z** (.7z) format offered by 7-Zip (www.7-zip.org) is now the top choice, due to its higher compression rate and self-extracting archives anyone can open.

32bit EXE

Although Windows 11 is a 64bit operating system, it can still run 32bit software, thanks to a feature called WoW64 x86 emulator. Microsoft may eventually drop this option, whether in a Windows 11 update or in Windows 12, which means you'll no longer be able to install programs in 32bit EXE (.exe) format.

What to use instead

The obvious solution is to download **64bit** programs instead. Currently, you shouldn't have any trouble running old 32bit software in Windows, but if you do it's worth trying Compatibility Mode. Right-click the program's EXE file and select Properties, then Compatibility. Click 'Run this program in compatibility mode for' (see screenshot above) and choose an older Windows version.

POSSIBLY DYING
MP3

The MP3 (MPEG Audio Layer III, .mp3) format is so synonymous with audio files that it's surprising to learn it's no longer actively developed. The Fraunhofer Institute, which helped create MP3, officially terminated its MP3 licensing program in 2017, which means there will be no further updates to the format.

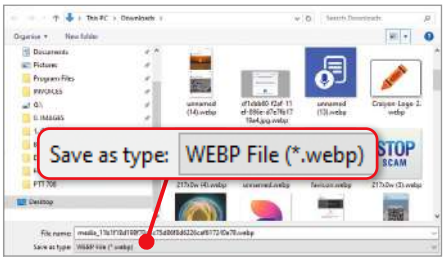
The rise of music-streaming services means MP3s are no longer downloaded and shared as frequently as they were 10 years ago, though it remains the most widely used and supported audio format.

What to use instead

MP3 isn't going anywhere yet, but **AAC** (Advanced Audio Coding, .aac) has gained popularity by being the default audio format on iPhones and iPads, and offering better quality at smaller file sizes. Many audiophiles prefer **FLAC** (Free Lossless Audio Codec, .flac), which compresses audio data at the highest possible quality, retaining the full dynamic range and detail of the original recording.

JPEG

As we explained in our 'What's all the fuss abou?' section in Issue 707 (page 49), the widely used JPEG (Joint Photographic Experts Group, .jpg or .jpeg) image format could soon be replaced by JPEG XL (.jxl). The latter supports lossy and lossless compression (striking a better balance between file size and quality), makes images 60 per cent smaller and works more quickly too. However, JPEG XL isn't currently supported by Chromium browsers and requires a plug-in to use in Windows.

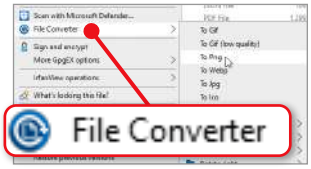


Many online images are now displayed in Google's WebP format

What to use instead

Google's **WebP** (.webp) format is increasingly being used for displaying and downloading web images (see screenshot above), because it offers both lossy and lossless compression. This ensures pictures load quickly on web pages while maintaining their quality. Apple devices use **HEIC** (.heic or .heif) to store images, which is lossy but offers superior quality to JPEG. In truth, JPEG will be around for a while yet, and PNG is the best option for everyday use. ca

How to open old file formats



The simplest way to open old files in deprecated formats, which aren't supported by newer software, is to use a file converter. There are lots of online tools that perform this task, including Zamzar (www.zamzar.com) and CloudConvert (www.cloudconvert.com), but most limit how many files you can convert for free per day.

Instead, download the free program **File Converter** (www.snipca.com/54447). This lets you convert files simply by right-clicking them and choosing an option from the File Converter submenu (see screenshot below).

It automatically detects the file type to give you relevant conversion options, and works with a wide range of formats – see www.snipca.com/54449 for the full list. Note that to convert Office documents, you need to have Office 2013 or later installed.

Alternatively, try **File Viewer Lite** (www.snipca.com/54451), which supports more than 150 formats, including several old and obsolete ones – see www.snipca.com/54450.

Problems Solved

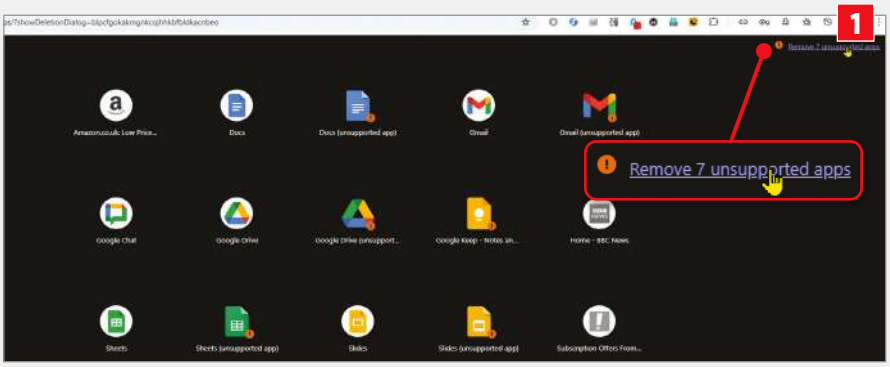
Our experts solve all your tech problems

PROBLEM OF THE FORTNIGHT

What are these unsupported apps that Chrome wants me to remove?

Q Chrome has just started warning me that I need to remove unsupported apps. It displays a list that includes Gmail and YouTube, among others. I use these tools every day, so I don't want to remove them. If I click the Cancel button I can continue, and everything seems fine. What's going on?

Derek Chappell



Google is ending support for its old web apps this year, which is why you'll see this message

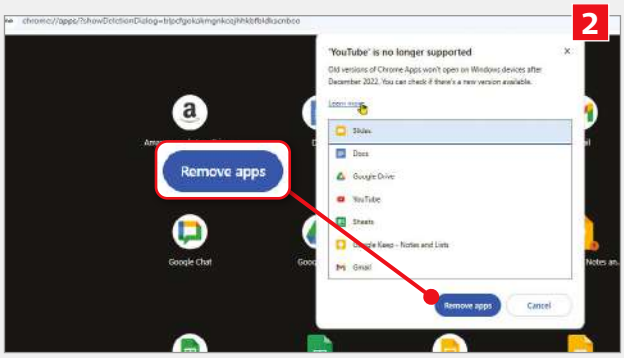
A Originally, Chrome apps were tools you could install through the Chrome Web Store (https://chromewebstore.google.com) and they worked much like typical Windows desktop apps. This meant they opened in their own window rather than in a Chrome tab, and you could use them offline. However, Google started phasing them out a few years ago, with official support ending in June 2025, which is why you're now seeing this warning (see screenshot 1).

You don't need to have been using any of these tools in 'app mode' to receive this warning in Chrome. Simply having one or more installed on your PC is enough. This is an important detail, because we think you probably haven't been using any of them in app mode. It's more likely that you've been visiting their websites (such as www.gmail.com or www.youtube.com), unaware that you also had app versions of these services installed. You can see what's installed in Chrome by typing chrome://apps into Chrome's address bar then pressing Enter.

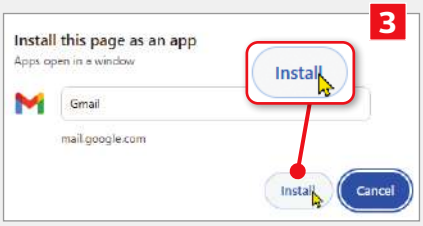
Perhaps you added the app versions years ago, but you would certainly have had to 'install' them for them to switch from web to app mode. Either way, there's no point in keeping these obsolete versions, so we'd advise clicking the 'Remove apps' button (see screenshot 2) to get rid of them. This won't stop you accessing the web versions of these services, which is what we think you've been using until now anyway.

Google has replaced the old Chrome web apps with something called Progressive Web Apps, or PWAs. Like the previous apps, PWAs are websites that can behave like standard Windows desktop apps, which means you can install them, open them in their own window and even use them offline.

If you install Gmail as a PWA, for example, instead of opening it in a Chrome tab, it behaves more like a separate app. It will load a little faster and work better offline, which is useful if you're using it on a laptop to read and write messages while travelling, for example. You can also pin installed PWAs to the Windows Taskbar or Start menu.



Click 'Remove apps' to delete obsolete apps and rid yourself of Google's warning message



To install a PWA app, visit its site, click the Chrome menu and follow the steps below

If you'd like to try one of Google's new PWAs, visit the website of a service you use, such as Gmail, then open the Chrome menu (three dots, top right). Next, move your cursor to 'Cast, save and share' before clicking 'Install page as app', then confirm by clicking Install (see screenshot 3).

If you later decide you'd rather use the tool as a website in your browser, launch the PWA version, then open the three-dots menu again before clicking Uninstall, then confirm by clicking Uninstall again.

How can I make my old games work in Windows 11?

Q I've enjoyed playing Sid Meier's Alien Crossfire game ever since its was first released in around 1999, and Alpha Centauri before that. Now the Windows 11 24H2 update has broken Alien Crossfire, and it won't run, although for some reason Alpha Centauri still works.

I found a number of suggested fixes online, but none of them worked. I then tried setting up a Windows 10 virtual machine using VirtualBox. Alien Crossfire loaded within this, but it was slow and clunky, and I'd have to buy a Window 10 licence to keep using it.

Can you help?

Rob van der Linden

PRESERVED
GOOD OLD GAME
BY GOG
GOG Preservation Program
This game is a Good Old Game. GOG maintains and preserves it as part of the Good Old Game Preservation Program to give you the best experience available for good old games on the market.
Read more on how GOG preserves games

GOG revives old PC games and keeps them running on modern systems

A There's rarely a magic fix that will get 25-year-old software working with modern versions of Windows. In many cases the only option is the one you've already tried – creating a virtual machine running an older operating system that's compatible with your program. However, as you've discovered, this option can be slow and expensive.

Your situation isn't hopeless, however. Both Alpha Centauri and its Alien Crossfire expansion pack are part of the preservation efforts at GOG (www.gog.com – see screenshot). GOG (or Good Old Game) is an online store that specialises in old games that are free of digital-rights management (DRM), which means they don't require online activation or special software to run.

The organisation started by reviving classic PC games for modern computers and has since expanded to include newer titles. So while your original copy of Alien Crossfire is in effect broken after the latest Windows 11 update, the GOG version has been kept up to date and still works perfectly in Windows 11 24H2.

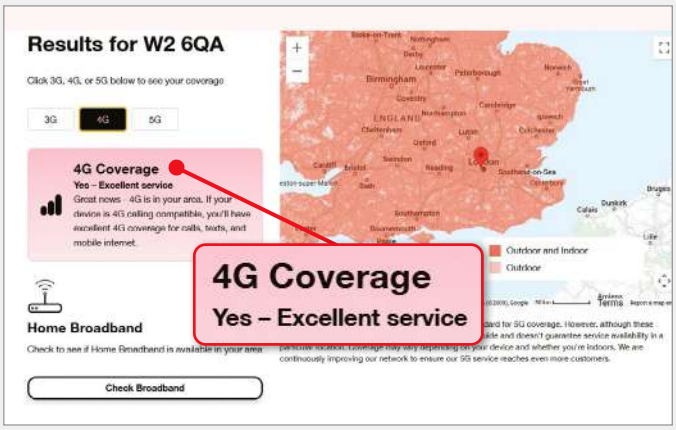
So that's the good news. However, the slightly annoying aspect is that you'll have to buy the GOG version of Alpha Centauri (which includes Alien Crossfire) to solve your problem. Yes, we know you already own the game, but your version is 25 years old and no longer works, whereas GOG is selling an up-to-date version that does (www.snipca.com/54142).

We think the £4.79 it's asking is a fair price for the work involved in keeping the game up to date, and it's certainly a lot cheaper than buying a Windows 10 licence.

Is 4G fast enough to replace my broadband service?

Q I'm retiring later this year, so I'm looking ahead at savings I can make when my income shrinks. My Plusnet broadband is on the list. I live in a semi-rural location, but we can get 4G mobile data through my O2 mobile phone. As well as a PC, we have a smart speaker and use catch-up TV. Would a 4G SIM give me everything I need? At the moment my Plusnet broadband manages download speeds of around 28Mbps, and we won't get full fibre in our area until mid-2026 at the earliest. Keeping costs down is my main priority. Any advice?

Allan Whitehead


Results for W2 6QA
Click 3G, 4G, or 5G below to see your coverage
3G
4G
5G
4G Coverage
Yes – Excellent service
Great news - 4G is in your area. If your device is 4G calling compatible, you'll have excellent 4G coverage for calls, texts, and mobile internet.
Home Broadband
Check to see if Home Broadband is available in your area
Check Broadband
4G Coverage
Yes – Excellent service
Outdoor and Indoor
Outdoor

Check mobile coverage in your area before switching from broadband to 4G or 5G

A In theory – and ideally with an unlimited data plan – you could use your mobile phone as a Wi-Fi hotspot and connect everything to the internet through that. However, while that's the cheapest option, it's not very practical, because every device in your house would lose its internet connection if you ever went out with your mobile phone.

A better solution is to buy a 4G or 5G router. O2 offers a few options (www.snipca.com/54143) but they're not the cheapest and they come with data limits. Rival Three has a better range, with unlimited data, starting at £21 a month (www.snipca.com/54144).

You'd need to check the network's coverage, at www.snipca.com/54145 (see screenshot), to make sure you'd get a reliable signal in your area. Either 4G or 5G would be fine for everyday internet use, and possibly faster than your Plusnet broadband connection, especially on 5G.

Can I add Bluetooth LE to my laptop?

Q Back in Issue 699 (page 35), you explained how to pair hearing aids with a laptop that supports Bluetooth LE. Sadly, my laptop doesn't offer this. However, in the same issue's 'Ditch Your Cables in 2025' Cover Feature, you mentioned a USB adapter that can add Bluetooth to devices that don't have it built in (page 52). Putting the two together, I'm wondering if there's a device I can buy that adds Bluetooth LE to my laptop so I can connect my hearing aids to it.

Brian Hudson

A Yes, this is possible. Our only caveat is that your laptop probably won't benefit from the 'low energy' aspect of Bluetooth LE. That's because a USB Bluetooth LE dongle, such as the UGreen Bluetooth 5.4 model pictured below (£12 from www.snipca.com/54146) draws additional power from the laptop to run aspects of Bluetooth beyond LE.

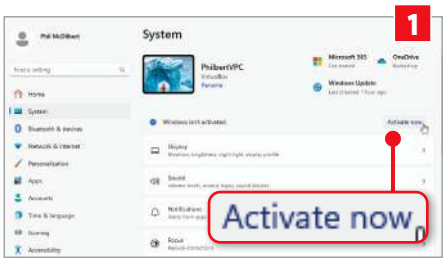
However, this is a very minor concern, and by inserting a Bluetooth LE dongle, you should be able to pair your laptop with compatible hearing aids. Check that your hearing aids support Bluetooth LE first, though.

A dongle such as this UGreen model can add Bluetooth LE to a PC without it

Where do I type my Windows product key?

Q I have a relatively new custom-made desktop PC that a local company built for me. It came with Windows 11 Home installed. This automatically updated to 24H2 recently, and since then a message has appeared asking me to activate Windows. When I click the option to 'Activate now' (see screenshot 1), Windows tells me it can't because the computer doesn't have a product key. I have the original Windows installation disc and the product key stuck to the side of my PC, but I can't see where I need to enter it. Why would a new computer not have a valid product key?

Terrence Sutton



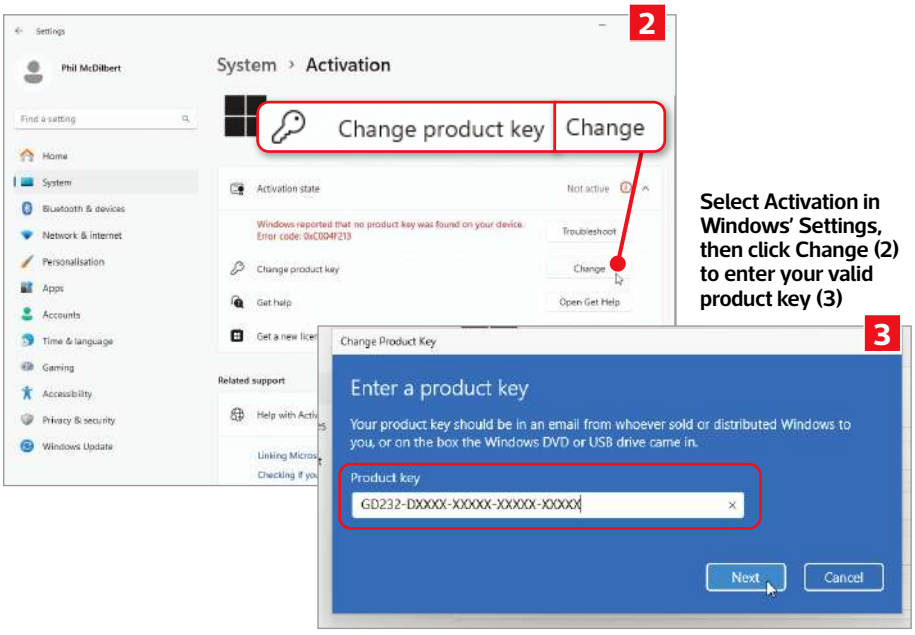
If Windows is using an incorrect product key, clicking 'Activate now' won't have any effect

A Windows 11 isn't supplied on a disc, so your local PC builder probably created a rescue disc for you. It sounds as if they used a generic manufacturer's key while setting up the PC, which worked until Windows checked it during the update.

Either way, you have a product key sticker on the side of your computer, so this should allow you to activate Windows.

First, click Start followed by the Settings cog, then Activation. Next, in the right-hand pane, alongside 'Change product key', click the Change button 2. Finally, type the product key into the box that appears, then click Next 3.

That should do the trick, but if you're still having problems, call Microsoft's activation centre on 0800 018 8354 and follow the instructions. You'll eventually reach a human operator if necessary.


2
System › Activation
Change product key
Change
3
Change Product Key
Enter a product key
Your product key should be in an email from whoever sold or distributed Windows to you, or on the box the Windows DVD or USB drive came in.
Product key
Next
Cancel

Select Activation in Windows' Settings, then click Change (2) to enter your valid product key (3)

Q: Can I replace my hard drive with an SSD?

A: Issue 696, page 67 – find it on our 2024 Back Issue CD

Buy it from www.snipca.com/53433

Should I be charging my phone less?

Q My brother and I were talking about phone charging. He has an iPhone, while I prefer Samsung models. I always charge mine to 100 per cent, but it seems Apple recommends charging iPhone batteries to a maximum of 80 per cent.

I haven't noticed any problems with my battery so far, and a quick search online suggests there are two competing schools of thought. As I've long relied on *Computeractive* for clear, honest advice, I thought I'd ask what you make of all this.

Brian Pike

A At the risk of sitting on the fence, both sides of the argument have merit. It's true that the iPhone 15 and later models use what Apple calls Optimised Battery Charging by default, with a suggested limit of 80 per cent (see screenshot). As the company explains at www.snipca.com/54147, lithium-ion batteries are considered consumables and they chemically degrade over time.

Good battery management can extend a battery's overall life. However, whether limiting your charges to 80 per cent of the maximum capacity is worth it depends on how you use your phone and how long you expect to keep it before upgrading.

On this point, we're more in the 'don't bother' camp. A typical lithium-ion battery might be good for anywhere between 500 and 1,000 full recharge cycles. At one full charge a day, that's around two to three years of use before performance noticeably starts to degrade. Even then, the battery still works – it just holds a little less charge.

If you replace your phone every three years or so, it's barely worth worrying about chemical ageing. If you prefer to hang on to it for longer, limiting your maximum charge makes more sense.

Incidentally, plenty of Android smartphones have similar features, but they tend not to be enabled by default. And iPhone users who want to take control can override Apple's defaults by opening settings, then tapping Battery followed by Charging.

9:41
Battery
Charging
iPhone learns from your charging and usage habits to help preserve battery lifespan over time. Learn more...
CHARGE LIMIT
80%
85%
90%
95%
100%
Optimized Battery Charging
When the charge limit is set to 100%, allow iPhone to wait to finish charging past 80% until the time you need to use it.
Clean Energy Charging
80%

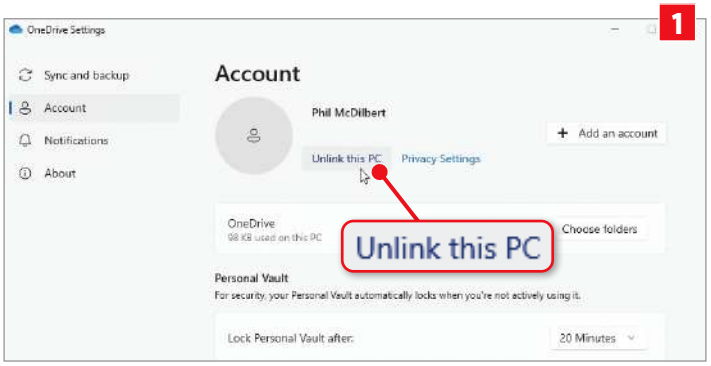
iPhones limit maximum charge to 80 per cent by default

Can I back up and sync my OneDrive files to an external drive?

Q I recently replaced my desktop PC with a laptop. The desktop PC had two large hard drives, one of which I used for backups, but my laptop has just one, smaller hard drive. I can still access all my files on OneDrive, but I'm a little nervous because I don't have a backup of that. Could I set up a larger external hard drive to back up my OneDrive contents and sync it so it's always up to date?

Graeme Neale

A OneDrive doesn't let you sync to two different drives on the same PC. So, no, you can't achieve exactly what you want. If you have a second PC, you could connect the external drive to that and configure OneDrive on that computer to keep all your files on the external drive.

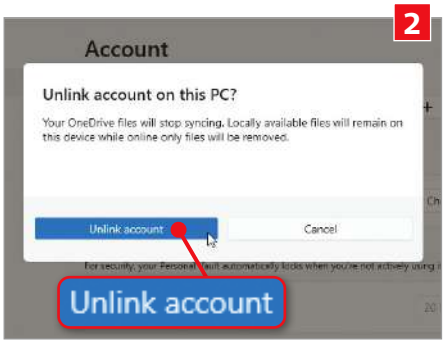


To unlink OneDrive from a PC, first open the Account tab in OneDrive's settings then click 'Unlink this PC'

The web version of OneDrive, at www.onedrive.com, does let you download files and folders manually, but as it limits how many you can select at a time, it's not much use here.

One option is to set your larger external hard drive as the OneDrive location, but you'll have to make sure it's plugged in whenever OneDrive is running. To set this up, first click the OneDrive icon in the taskbar, then the Settings cog. Next, in the Account tab, click 'Unlink this PC' (see screenshot 1) then confirm by clicking 'Unlink account' 2.

When OneDrive restarts, sign in and this time click 'Change location'. Select your external hard drive, and leave OneDrive to set everything up from there.


2
Account
Unlink account on this PC?
Your OneDrive files will stop syncing. Locally available files will remain on this device while online only files will be removed.
Unlink account
Cancel
Unlink account

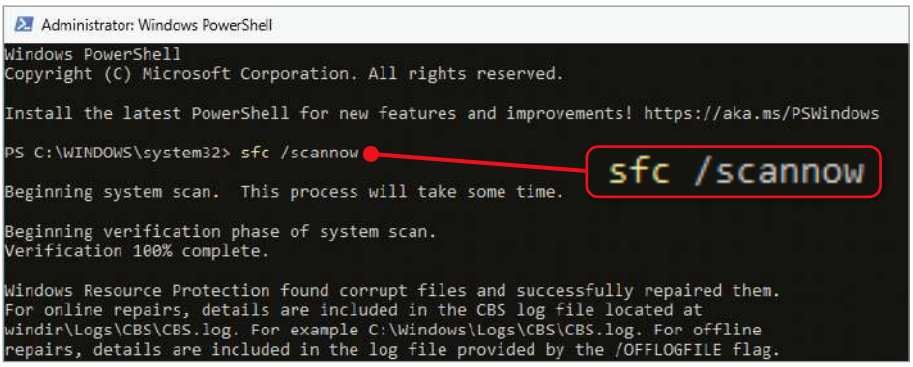
When this box appears, click 'Unlink account' to confirm your decision

Why can't I create new folders on my Windows 10 PC?

Q For some reason I can't create new folders on my Windows 10 PC. Nothing happens when I click the New Folder icon. I've also tried right-clicking it, but without any luck. Any idea what's causing this and how I fix it?

Roy Simpson

A That's certainly strange. First, we'd suggesting trying the keyboard shortcut for creating a new folder, which is to press the Control key+Shift+N. To be clear, you hold down Ctrl+Shift together then tap the N key. If that works, at least you'll be able to create new folders, but we'd still be scratching our heads as to why the button isn't working in File Explorer.


Administrator: Windows PowerShell
Windows PowerShell
Copyright (C) Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.
Install the latest PowerShell for new features and improvements! https://aka.ms/PSWindows
PS C:\WINDOWS\system32> sfc /scannow
Beginning system scan. This process will take some time.
Beginning verification phase of system scan.
Verification 100% complete.
Windows Resource Protection found corrupt files and successfully repaired them.
For online repairs, details are included in the CBS log file located at
windir\Logs\CBS\CBS.log. For example C:\Windows\Logs\CBS\CBS.log. For offline
repairs, details are included in the log file provided by the /OFFLOGFILE flag.
sfc /scannow

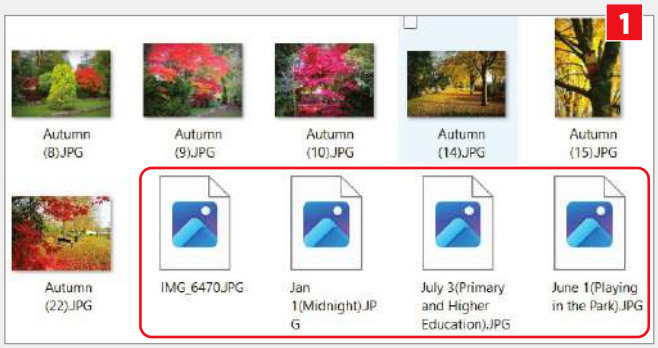
Windows 10's hidden System File Checker tool can find and repair corrupted files on your PC

Either way, we think some files have been corrupted and are interfering with this function and possibly others you haven't encountered yet. Thankfully, a hidden Windows tool called System File Checker, or SFC, can be effective in resolving problems like this.

To use it, first press Windows key+X to open the Quick Links menu then, depending on how your version of Windows 10 is set up, choose either 'Command Prompt (Admin)' or 'Windows PowerShell (Admin)'. Then, in the Command Prompt or PowerShell window, type sfc /scannow (see screenshot) and press Enter. Wait for the scan to finish, which could take a while, and then see what SFC has to say.

In most cases SFC can repair any faults automatically, but read the report carefully to see if you need to take any further steps. Finally, restart your PC.

Why have my image-file thumbnails disappeared?



File Explorer might show blue icons instead of image thumbnails if your thumbnails cache file has been corrupted

Q Some of the image files on my computer appear as blue icons rather than thumbnails of the image. Do you know why this is happening?

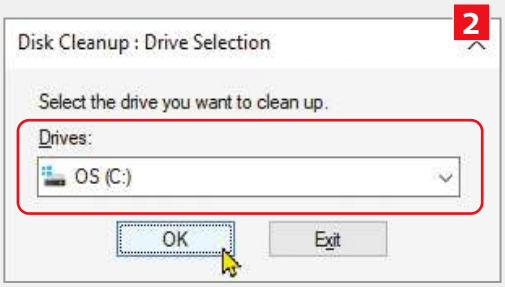
Bob Wellcoat

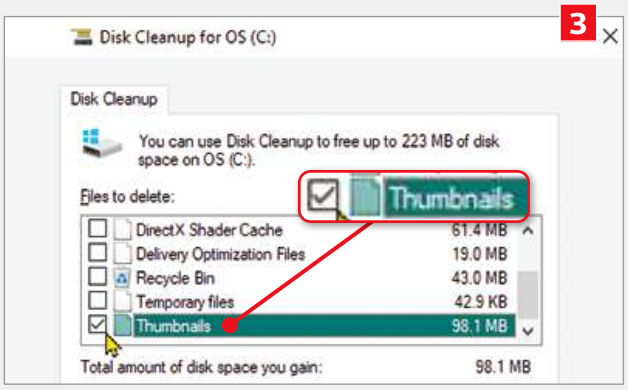
A For context, you sent us an image showing the problem in File Explorer's 'Large icons' view (see screenshot 1). To make File Explorer quicker and more responsive when using this view, Windows stores image thumbnails in a file known as a cache, so we think the cache file on your system has been corrupted. The easiest way to fix this is to delete the thumbnail cache, which will prompt Windows to rebuild it when you next restart your PC

This doesn't take long, and you don't need to do anything other than deleting the existing cache. To do this, press Windows key+R to open the Run box, then type cleanmgr and press Enter.

This launches the Disk Cleanup tool. Choose your main system drive – usually C: 2 – and then, under Disk Cleanup, remove the ticks from all the boxes except Thumbnails 3. Now click OK followed by Delete Files. Restart your PC when it's finished.

To delete the thumbnails cache, open the Disk Cleanup tool and choose your main system drive – usually C:...




3
Disk Cleanup for OS (C:)
Disk Cleanup
You can use Disk Cleanup to free up to 223 MB of disk space on OS (C:).
Files to delete:
Thumbnails
DirectX Shader Cache 61.4 MB
Delivery Optimization Files 19.0 MB
Recycle Bin 43.0 MB
Temporary files 42.9 KB
Thumbnails 98.1 MB
Total amount of disk space you gain: 98.1 MB

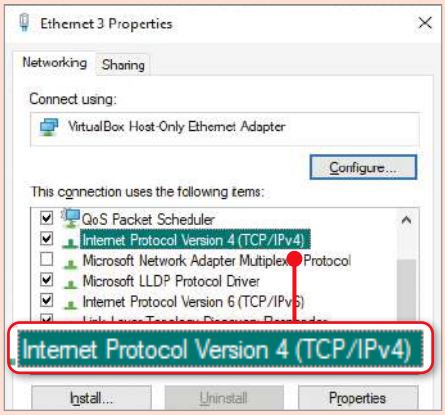
...then in the Disk Cleanup tab, remove the ticks from all but the Thumbnails box and click OK followed by Delete

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN...

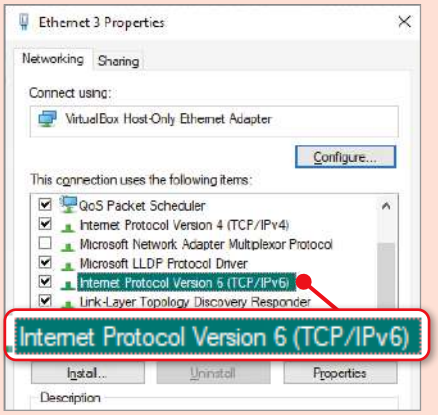
IPv4 and IPv6

Q I was poking around in my router's settings recently when I noticed options for both IPv4 and IPv6 (see screenshots). I think I've heard that IPv6 is more future-proof, but my internet seems to work just fine with IPv4, so what's the difference? Is IPv6 better? Will I need to do something to switch over? And if so, when?

Liam Carter



IPv4 is a system for creating IP addresses for every device connected to the internet



IPv4 was in danger of running out of addresses, so IPv6 fixed this problem

A Let's start with IP, which stands for 'internet protocol' and refers to a set of rules that determine how devices communicate online. Version 4 (IPv4) has been around since the early 1980s and uses 32bit addresses – four-part numerical labels, such as the 192.168.0.1 address many people use to access their router.

This system allows for a total of around 4.3 billion unique addresses. That seemed like a lot four decades ago. However, with pretty much every internet-connected device requiring its own IP address, IPv4 simply didn't have sufficient capacity to cater for the future.

That's where IPv6 came in. This version uses 128bit addresses, allowing for more potential unique addresses than there are stars in the universe. It's been around since the late 1990s but wasn't terribly relevant until recently. In case you're wondering, there was an 'IPv5' but, like IPv4, it was hobbled by 32-bit addressing, so it never made it out of the lab.

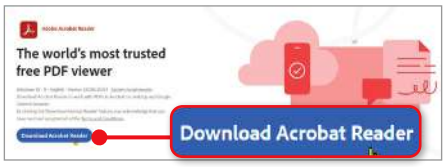
As far as most users are concerned, IPv6 doesn't really make anything 'better'. It just means we can keep creating and using internet-connected devices. Modern routers cater for both IPv4 and IPv6 because both address types are in widespread use. Indeed, IPv4 is unlikely ever to disappear completely because far too many old devices and services rely on it. In other words, there will be no big switch over. Instead, new devices and services will adopt IPv6 rather than IPv4. But as a user, in all but the rarest cases, you can simply forget about it. It's the router's job to take care of these details.

Want to know the difference between technical terms? Email noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

Will I need to pay for Adobe Reader in future?

Q Thanks for your great magazine, which I've had delivered to my door for many years. I also buy the previous year's back issues on CD or USB stick. I believe I have to use Acrobat Reader to access the digital versions. With this in mind I noted that, in Issue 701's Consumeractive section, you said Adobe plans to make Acrobat Reader a subscription service in 2025. Does this mean I'll have to subscribe to Adobe Acrobat Reader to access my digital back issues in future?

Bruce Banfield



Acrobat Reader is still free and is unlikely to require a subscription charge in the future

A Actually, we said Acrobat was set to become a subscription product in 2025, which it has. However, we did confuse matters a little by referring to it as Adobe's PDF reader. While that's technically accurate, Acrobat is actually a lot more than that. It's the full version of the company's PDF-management suite. With Acrobat Standard or Pro you can certainly read PDFs but also create and edit them, and do a lot more besides. These are the only editions of the product you have to pay for, and now they require a subscription. We should have been clearer that only the full versions of Acrobat are subject to subscription charges.

The free version, currently called Adobe Acrobat Reader, remains totally free (see screenshot). We say 'currently' because Adobe has made a real mess of its product branding over the years. Originally, it was called Adobe Acrobat Reader, then just Adobe Reader, then Adobe Acrobat Reader DC. As this freebie is the gateway tool that helps to keep the PDF format useful, we don't think the company will be charging for it any time soon. So it remains a free download from www.snipca.com/54148.

Next Issue

ON SALE Weds 7 May

- How do I download all images in Gmail?
- How do I schedule recurring events in Google Calendar?
- Why won't my sat-nav update? ...And many more

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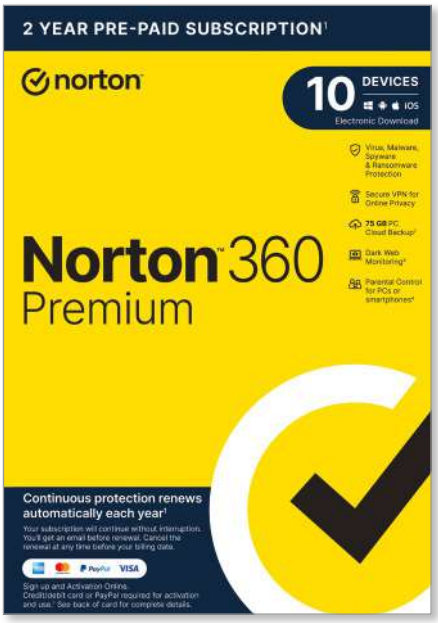

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Reader Support

Having a problem with our recommended software or expert tips? Email **editor@computeractive.co.uk** and we'll do our best to help

Can I revert to classic Outlook without a Microsoft 365 account?

Q I'd love to be able to get back to the old 'classic' Outlook, as you explained in Issue 706 (page 6). However, I followed your instructions and completed the download (from www.snipca.com/54211), but the only way it can be used is by also installing Microsoft 365 and having a 365 account. I don't want to subscribe to 365, so is there another way to revert to the classic version?

Martin Jones

A The link we printed in Issue 706 takes you to a Microsoft support page for 'Outlook for Windows (Classic)', where you can either click the Download button and run the installer, or opt to 'Install from Store', which takes you to the Microsoft Store page for the Windows app version of the program.

Whichever route you choose, you'll see a confusing prompt to install 'Microsoft 365 and Office', as you suggest. However, if you continue with the process, you'll discover that the only component that ends up being installed is the classic version of Outlook, not the full Microsoft 365 office suite. And you don't need a Microsoft 365 account to use it. You can set up classic Outlook with a third-party email account, as normal.

As a side note, it's worth mentioning that the first time you run classic Outlook after setting up your account, there seems to be an odd quirk that makes the program's user interface look suspiciously like the Microsoft 365 version of Outlook, rather than the edition that comes with Windows. However, we found that if you then close Outlook and re-launch it, the interface reverts to a more familiar look.

Why can't I use GoAwayEdge to remove Edge?

Q I installed GoAwayEdge (www.snipca.com/53576) to remove Microsoft Edge, as you recommend in Issue 703's 'Break Windows' worst rules' Cover Feature. However, I couldn't find the screen that you pictured on page 53. Am I missing something?

Bob Newton

Scroll down to the 'Installation methods' heading and click this link

A The screen you mention is the main GoAwayEdge interface, so we're guessing you may not have been able to install or run the tool for some reason. The download and setup process can be a bit confusing, so here are more precise instructions.

On the web page we linked to, scroll down to the 'Installation methods' heading and click the 'Download the latest version from GitHub' link (see screenshot above). This will take you to a new page – scroll down to the Assets heading and click the 'GoAwayEdge.exe' link here.

If you're using Edge, you may see a warning that the browser has blocked your download – if so, click the three horizontal dots next to this message and select Keep. Then, in the window that opens, click 'Show more' and select 'Keep anyway'.

Once it has downloaded, run the 'GoAwayEdge.exe' file – doing so may result in a prompt to install '.NET Desktop Runtime'. If so, click 'Download it now', save the file, and run the '.NET Desktop Runtime' installer. Once this has completed, run 'GoAwayEdge.exe' again, click Install and follow the prompts until you reach the screen we showed in Issue 703 – from there you can follow our original instructions.

Why can't I run Patch My PC?

Q Having used previous versions of Patch My PC with no problems, I was looking forward to trying the latest version 5 update (see Issue 705, page 19, www.snipca.com/53975). Sadly, Windows has other ideas and repeatedly throws up the error message 'Requested registry access is not allowed' every time I run the program. I've tried running it as administrator and disabling my antivirus software, with no difference. Do you know what's going wrong?

Ken Boote

A We weren't able to replicate your problem with Patch My PC 5 for ourselves, so it's difficult to diagnose what's going on. But there are some things you can do to try and get it working. First, we'd suggest uninstalling Patch My PC and downloading the latest version, which may include fixes for problems like yours.

Before you install it, however, we'd recommend downloading '.NET Desktop Runtime' from Microsoft, as this component is required for Patch My PC 5 to work properly.

Go to www.snipca.com/54376, scroll down to the '.NET Desktop Runtime 8.0.14' heading and click the link for the version you need – x64 for 64bit PCs or x86 for 32bit (see screenshot below). Install this, then reinstall Patch My PC.

Try installing '.NET Desktop Runtime' manually, choosing x64 or x86

Jargon Buster

128bit A type of computing or encryption system that uses 128-bit addresses, allowing more unique values than stars in the universe.

32bit/64bit A measure of how much data a PC can process at once. Most older computers are 32bit, more modern ones are 64bit.

3G/4G/5G Technologies that deliver faster mobile broadband.

4K Video with a resolution of at least 3840x2160 pixels.

7z A format for compressing files into an archive format.

8K Video with a resolution of 7680x4320 pixels.

Add-on A program that adds extra features to your browser.

Administrator Someone who can make changes to a computer that will affect others who also use it.

AES-256bit A form of encryption based on a key length of 256 bits.

Airplane mode Phone mode that disables all radio communication (GSM, Wi-Fi, Bluetooth, etc) so it's safe to use on aircraft.

APK Android Package Kit. The file format Android uses to install apps.

Benchmarking Comparing software and products with an accepted standard.

Biometric Using measurable personal characteristics, such as fingerprints, for identification.

Bluetooth LE A type of Bluetooth technology designed to consume less power while not sacrificing signal strength.

Brute-force attack A method of breaking encryption by simply guessing all possible passwords until the right one is found.

Cache A temporary space for storing information.

cd/m² Candela per square metre. Standard unit of brightness.

Chatbot A program designed to recreate conversation with humans.

Client A program that acts as an interface between PC and server.

CMYK Refers to the four coloured inks found in many printers: Cyan, Magenta, Yellow and Black.

Codec A file that tells a computer how to record or play a type of media file.

Compatibility mode A setting in Windows that lets you run programs that would otherwise only run in older Windows versions.

Copilot+ A Microsoft standard for PCs that can run advanced AI tools.

Core Units on a processor that carry out program instructions.

CPU Central Processing Unit. Another term for a PC processor.

CSV Comma Separated Value. A standard file format, used for storing information in tables.

DAB+ An updated and more efficient version of DAB which allows more stations to be broadcast and sometimes in a higher quality.

DCI-P3 A colour space that has a wider spectrum than sRGB.

Deepfake A video that superimposes a fake voice or face on a clip of someone talking.

Deprecation When a software feature is phased out and no longer recommended for use.

DisplayPort A socket for connecting monitors.

DirectX 12 Microsoft tool required to run games and videos in Windows.

Distro A version of the Linux OS and the programs that go with it.

Dolby Atmos Surround-sound technology that adds 'height' to audio.

Driver A file that tells Windows how to work with an external device.

Email alias An additional email address you can use for a specific purpose, such as for work or personal contacts.

Emoji A small graphic that can be inserted into a text or email.

Emulator A program that makes one computer act like another, allowing it to run that computer's software.

End-to-end encryption A way of encrypting messages so that the only people who can read them are the sender and recipient.

EXE A program file designed to run in Windows.

Firmware Basic software stored on hardware, such as a processor, to control its operation.

Frame rate The number of still images, or frames, shown per second to create a moving image.

Freemium A business model where basic services are provided for free, while more advanced features must be paid for.

FTTP Fibre broadband that goes straight to the doorstep. Faster than FTTC (fibre-to-the-cabinet).

God Mode An option in Windows that shows access to 250 control panel settings in one list.

GPU A chip designed to create 3D graphics, but which can also be used for other computing tasks.

Graphics card A component in a computer that produces the image shown on the monitor.

H.264 A type of MPEG4 video that is used on Blu-ray discs.

H.265 Video file format that offers the same level of picture quality as AVC, but with better compression.

HDMI A type of connection that transmits high-definition video and audio signals.

Hotspot A public area covered by a Wi-Fi network that lets you access the internet, either free or for a fee.

HTML The language used to write most web pages.

Hz Hertz. Measures the frequency something happens: 1Hz equals once a second.

IP address A unique set of numbers used to identify computers and websites on the internet.

IP68 International Protection rating. Denotes that a device is resistant to dust, general dirt and sand; and can be placed underwater at depths of up to 1.5m for 30 minutes without effect.

IPS A screen technology that has wider viewing angles and better, more accurate colours.

JSON JavaScript Object Notation. Used to transmit data between a web application and a server.

Layers Tool in image editors to work on separate layers independently.

Lithium-ion A rechargeable energy-storage device for electronics and vehicles.

Macro An automated series of commands or options.

MagSafe Apple's magnetic technology for wireless charging and attaching accessories.

Metadata A set of data that gives information about a file.

MicroSD card A small type of memory card.

MP4 A type of digital movie file often used for portable players.

MVNO Mobile virtual network operator. A mobile provider that piggybacks on another network.

Noise cancellation Method for reducing unwanted sound.

NVMe An interface that lets solid-state drives work faster.

OCR The process by which printed text is scanned and converted into documents that can be edited.

OLED A thin-film organic light-emitting diode used in screens.

Partition A large hard drive can be split into two or more partitions.

Passkey A method for signing into accounts by typing a one-off code, fingerprint or facial recognition.

Passphrase A selection of (usually) random words to use instead of a password.

PCIe A faster version of PCI – a slot on the motherboard for expansion cards.

Plug-in A small program that adds extra features to software.

Product key A unique serial number that must be typed in by the user before a program will launch for the first time.

QR code Quick Response code. A barcode that can be read using smartphones.

RAM The computer's working area, used for data storage while the PC is switched on.

Ransomware Malware run by hackers who lock files on a PC and demand a payment to release them.

RAR Roshal Archive. A format for storing compressed files.

Recovery key A password to access a locked account.

Refresh rate The number of times per second that the image on your monitor is redrawn.

Refurbished A second-hand device that has been repaired by its manufacturer so that it can be resold and reused.

Registry value A setting stored in the registry that controls how Windows or programs behave.

RGB Advanced type of LED backlit keyboard that generates colours by projecting combinations of red, green and blue lights.

Roaming charge Fee incurred for using your phone to receive data via overseas mobile networks.

Sideload To install apps without using the official Android store.

SIM The smart card used by all digital mobile phones.

SIP A standard for setting up calls between internet telephony devices.

SMS Short Message Service. More commonly called text messaging.

SSD Solid-state drive. Storage that uses no moving parts.

System restore point Collection of system files on a given date and time to which Windows can revert if a problem occurs.

TAR A format for archiving files and directories.

TPM A chip that stores keys which encrypt data on your hard drive.

Two-factor authentication A system that uses two different means to identify the user.

Ultra HD Ultra high definition. Resolution of 3840x2160.

Ultrawide Offering a field of view that's wider than traditional digital cameras.

USB 2.0/3.0/3.1/3.2/4.0 Faster successors to USB.

USB-A The original type of USB connector, released in 1996.

USB-C A new connector that's reversible.

Virtual machine A software-based computer running inside another computer.

VPN Virtual private network. Keeps all internet communication safe and private.

Wi-Fi 6E Wi-Fi 6 extended to include the 6GHz band.

Wi-Fi Calling Lets you make and receive voice and video calls over a Wi-Fi connection.

Widget A small program such as a calendar that runs on the Windows desktop.

ZIP file A file that contains compressed documents or files.

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3	NOW BROADBAND	Superfast	£24 Price could change during contract	24 Months	61Mbps avg. speed	N/A	£288.00
4	plusnet	Full Fibre 900	£39.99 £42.99 from April 1st 2026. £45.99 from April 1st 2027	24 Months	900Mbps avg. speed	£100 Gift Card	£382.88

* First year cost inclusive of reward. Calculated based on 12 x monthly cost (includes price rise) – reward value.

*Reward subject to change. Available as of 7th April 2025.

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Know How

Wondering if ChatGPT's new free image generator can cure his AI malaise, **Robert Irvine** tries to...

Create higher-quality AI images

1

2

3

Robert was impressed by the realistic results produced by ChatGPT's new free image generator

Recently I've found that some AI-generated content makes me feel ill. It's nothing to do with the blurring of creative and ethical boundaries involved in producing AI art, nor the fear that AI will eventually put me out of a writing job.

> Some AI image generators should come with a health warning

It's more a visceral reaction to pictures that are clearly fake, in an unnerving and nausea-inducing way. Their plasticky texture, lack of depth, unnatural colours and strange glow combine to fill me with unease rather than a sense of wonder.

Obviously, the more powerful and expensive AI tools are capable of creating amazingly realistic pictures you'd never know aren't real. But the free AI image generators most of us use, which have flooded the web with their 'slop', should come with a health warning, such as 'keep your creepy rainbow frog pics to yourself'.

Much as I like ChatGPT, its Dall-E 3-powered image generator has been responsible for a lot of poor AI art. So I was pleased to learn that OpenAI has introduced an advanced image generator, which produces results that are "not only beautiful, but useful" (www.snipca.com/54401).

Now available for all ChatGPT plans through the GPT-4o language model, the new tool proved so popular on launch that OpenAI had to suspend it for free accounts for a few days while it upgraded its GPUs to cope with the demand. OpenAI claims it does a much better job of blending images and text, so you can include words in your generated pictures without the result looking awful.

To test the new image generator, I visited the ChatGPT website in my browser (www.snipca.com/54402) and signed into my free account. For its first task, I uploaded a picture of the cover of Issue 706 of *Computeractive* and asked ChatGPT to design a poster for it. To make things more interesting, I suggested the poster should be displayed at a train station with two people looking at it.

After a couple of minutes of processing, ChatGPT produced an image that matched my description (see image 1). The result wasn't perfect – it misspelt *Computeractive* and some of the text was gibberish – but it looked suitably realistic, with the woman sporting a Rachel Reeves-style bob.

Next, inspired by the Cover Feature in this issue (see page 50), I asked the AI tool to mock up an image of a Windows PC, with the words 'What Windows 11 does BETTER than Windows 10' on the screen. I specified that the picture should feature a man sitting at the computer in his home office.

Again the result was accurate and realistic (see image 2), with the words presented in a font not dissimilar to the one we use on the cover. Spookily, the man even looked a bit like me.

Finally – because you only get three free generations a day – I asked ChatGPT to generate a picture of a receipt. This is one of its more controversial uses, because it could be exploited for fraud, which is against OpenAI's usage policies. However, a spokesperson has said it's fine, implying that no one's really going to fall for the fake receipts (www.snipca.com/54404).

I requested that the receipt be for computer parts, slightly crumpled and held up to the imaginary camera by a man with grey hair. ChatGPT duly complied (see image 3), producing a receipt for a CPU, motherboard, RAM and SSD, brandished by a stern-looking fellow. I'd forgotten to specify that the prices be in pounds sterling, but as I'd now reached my image-generation limit I couldn't tweak the dollar currency.

I was very impressed by the quality of ChatGPT's pictures, which may not have looked completely real but at least didn't make me feel queasy.

Need help creating AI images? Let us know: noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

Next issue: Robert tries to catalogue his book collection

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